

Office of the Headmaster, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; June 18, 1995

The forces of the 'Light' had gathered in the outer office of Albus Dumbledore, for the purported purpose of determining what the next move needed to be. The Tri-Wizard Tournament had concluded not twenty-four hours before and things had come to a head, both with the Minister of Magic and with the reincorporated Tom Riddle. The unmasking of Barty Crouch Jr. had shown everyone just how gullible and error-prone the Headmaster had become.

Jake and Miranda Granger had come to Hogwarts as Harry Potters' special guests to see the third task of the Tournament and therefore were, by dint of their relationship with Hermione Granger, present at the first reconvening of the Order of the Phoenix in more than thirteen years. Since they were adults, and particularly familiar with Harry Potter's life – especially as it connected with their daughters' life – they were allowed to learn some of the particulars of the changed situation.

Very quickly, the meeting had become heated, as Sirius Black was revealed and introduced to the group and the predictable reactions were made to his presence. Harry, Hermione, Jake, Miranda, Sirius, and Remus Lupin formed one block, while Molly, Arthur, Ginny, Ron, and to a lesser degree, Severus Snape formed the other. The twins, Fred and George Weasley broke ranks with their parents and joined Harry's group almost immediately, once they saw how the line-ups were shaking out.

The proximate instigators for the situation going all to hell were, as Harry might have predicted, Ron and Ginny Weasley. Ron had been glaring at Hermione for more than an hour, as she stood near Harry. However, the moment that Hermione took Harry's hand in hers, Ron exploded. Whipping out his wand, he sent a bludgeoning curse at Harry. So stunned was Harry at his former friends' behavior that he almost didn't get a shield up in time. He did though and the curse collided with one of the Greco-roman statutes that adorned the far corner of the office.

"You bastard!" Ron spat, "You knew I liked her and yet you just 'had' to have her. As if your fame and fortune wasn't enough. You couldn't even leave me the one thing you knew I wanted!"

Ginny Weasley was seething too, because she had grown up believing that she was destined to be the wife of 'The-Boy-Who-Lived'. It was something that Molly Weasley had done everything she could to foster and something that the Headmaster himself had supported.

Ginny was too smart to try to throw magic at Hermione Granger, though. Luna Lovegood, Ginny's life-long friend, had even said to her, "Don't try it, Ginny. You're a candle in comparison to her bonfire. If you start it, Hermione will finish it and you won't like the results...if she lets you live to feel them."

It was at the moment where Ron and Ginny were about to square off against Harry and Hermione; each picking their predestined target, that the Headmaster attempted to step into the conflict.

His wand was out and he looked coldly at Harry and Hermione. "I'm sorry, Harry; Ms. Granger. For the 'greater good', I'm afraid that I am going to have to insist that your romantic relationship end. We can't afford to be fighting the pure-bloods at the same time we're fighting Tom and his forces. For better or worse, a relationship with a Muggleborn girl would drive away whatever support we might otherwise be able to gather from those who are not presently aligning themselves with the Death eaters." By that, Dumbledore meant the Windermere families and those aligned with them. "Mr. Weasley" he said, turning to Ron, "would you please see to Ms. Granger's safety and escort her back to the Burrow? And Ms. Weasley, would you please make yourself ready to travel back to Little Whinging with Mr. Potter? He will need some company this summer that I'm sure you can provide."

Molly Weasley beamed at her only daughter; welcoming the opportunity for Ginny to 'get to know' Harry better. What Molly meant by 'get to know' was 'act like a slut, seduce Harry, and maybe get pregnant - thereby claiming a rightful share of the Potter family fortune.' It was what she had planned to do to Carlos Zabini when she had had the chance – until she had discovered that Carlos already had marriage contracts waiting for him and she would never qualify as either a first or second wife because of her family's relative poverty.

The two youngest Weasleys grinned and nodded their agreement – thinking that they had gotten their way. That idea was quickly stepped on by both Harry and Hermione.

"Headmaster!" Hermione almost snarled at the old man, getting his attention. "I am NOT going with Ron or Ginny or anyone else from the Weasley family. I am going with Harry and that is final."

The Headmaster's response was to lift his wand and say, "I'm sorry, Ms. Granger, but you don't have a choice. Stupefy."

A golden, shimmery shield appeared out of nowhere and deflected the Headmaster's curse upwards, into the ceiling. That was all it took for Hermione's parents to spring into action. Jake Granger stepped closer to Albus Dumbledore. "You son of a bitch! How dare you try to separate Hermione from Harry."

Dumbledore's eyes flashed and his voice dropped into a 'control' register. "It's for Harry's good. He can't be distracted."

Wham! Jake Granger's right fist suddenly came out of nowhere and smashed into the Headmaster's stomach; folding him over instantly. Looking down, Jake fixed his eyes on the gasping 'leader of the light'. "Don't fuck with me, old man. Hermione is my only daughter, and I will kill to protect her interests."

In a flash, Dumbledore's hand came up and a golden light gathered around it. Harry saw it and in an instant, had thrown a shield up around Hermione's father; protecting him against anything the Headmaster could use short of an Unforgivable. Dumbledore saw the shield too late and the spell came back at him. Reacting instinctively, Dumbledore dove out of the way and came to his feet several yards away, in a move that Harry would have scarcely credited him with being able to do, if he hadn't seen it with his own eyes.

Harry stepped in front of him with both hands up and crackling with magical energy; his body shielding Hermione's father from further attack. "Touch him and die, Headmaster."

Struggling against the pain of Jake Granger's punch, Albus Dumbledore tried to stand completely upright. It was obvious from

the look in his eyes that the physical assault was a complete shock to him and he didn't quite know how to think about it.

Clutching his stomach with his left hand, Dumbledore looked at Harry. Gone was any semblance of patience or kindness. In their place was a look of both anger and genuine madness. "You think to oppose me, Harry? Are you going to turn away from your destiny?"

Harry snorted; the disgust written all over his face. "Turn away? Not hardly. But, I'm going to take it on my terms and not yours. And yes, I'm going to oppose you. You and your loathsome minions here." Harry pointed at the Weasleys and Snape. "You're a blood bigot just like the rest of them, whether you'll admit it or not. You're also completely and totally incompetent as an administrator. I learned a lot this year when I was preparing for the Tournament, no thanks to you of course. Also, my magical core is unblocked now – thanks to Barty Crouch Jr. Gotta hand it to you, Headmaster. Not only did you hire a Death Eater, you hired him for the one position that could do me some good. Now that I think about it, it might be the only thing I've ever had to be thankful to Snakeface for. One of his minions actually made me much, much stronger."

If Harry hadn't been already anticipating it, he might not have been ready for how quickly the Headmaster's hand came up to throw the 'Petrificus Totalus' hex at him. He was ready though, and Harry's response was much more vindictive. Shielding his thoughts against any chance that the Headmaster would try to use them to anticipate his attack, Harry thought to himself, "Laceo". The cutting curse was just on the edge of being a 'dark' curse and therefore banned by the Ministry for Magic. It was delivered with so much power that the Headmaster wasn't able to completely defend against it and a large, deep gash appeared across the upper thigh of his left leg; causing him to cry out and buckle under the pain of it. Harry was immediately and deeply grateful that Sirius, after he was vindicated and freed by the Ministry the previous June, had had time to go to Grimmauld Place and find books in the Black Family Library that showed him how to do true occlumency and legilimency. It had taken the entire school-year to master, but it had paid huge dividends. The only thing that embarrassed him was that for all his remarkable skill and speed in learning the two, related mind-arts, Hermione had picked them up almost twice as fast, once Harry showed her the principles.

Harry pressed his advantage and threw three stunners in a row, each with as much power as he could muster. The final one got through and knocked the Headmaster onto his back and away from them by several feet. Harry then bound the unconscious Headmaster and took his wand and cloak; knowing that it probably contained many things that would be useful. The wand, in particular, was a prized possession. Harry could feel its radiant power as he held it and wondered if it, rather than innate talent, was the true source of the Headmasters' ferocity as a wizard.

Remus Lupin and Sirius Black had not been passive during the confrontation either. The moment that the Headmaster had thrown his first curse, the two Marauders had gone to town on the Weasleys; leaving them unconscious and bound on the floor. Severus Snape had come off worst, as he had tried to use the Cruciatus curse on Sirius Black. That had earned him a vicious cutting curse to the neck in reply. The foul man had bled out quickly and lay dead on the floor. Once he was down, Sirius kicked him in the groin, to make sure he was dead.

With a couple flicks of the wrist, Sirius repaired the far corner of the Headmaster's office and transfigured the body into a replica of the statute that Ron's wayward bludgeoning curse had destroyed. When he was finished, nothing was left looking at all out of place. With a couple of 'Scourgify' charms, all the blood from the floor was gone; leaving no trace of violence behind, and if they were lucky, his body would not be found for some time. He wished that he had time to ransack the slimy potion-masters' private stores of potions, but he knew that things were moving too fast and that they'd have to come back or send an elf to do what they could not.

Once Harry was done, he looked up at Hermione, her parents, and the Weasley twins. "Well, this tares it then. We've declared war on the Headmaster. I don't know how many of the Order will follow me, but you can bet that we're going to have a fight on our hands from some of them. I beat the Headmaster today only because he was in a great deal of pain and couldn't completely focus his magic. The next time I have to face him...and I am sure that there will be a next time, I'm not going to be nearly so lucky. We're also not going to be able to return to Hogwarts so long as he is Headmaster. That means going to a different school. I'm thinking we head to the States or even up into Canada. Alternatively, we could head to New Zealand or Australia. Whatever we do, we're going to have to move fast. I

know he's is not going to take this lightly." Harry pointed at the Headmaster with the tip of his shoe.

There were nods all around and looks of determination. Harry turned to face his long-time love; taking her hands in his. "Hermione – I love you. You know that and you know that I will never, ever leave you. I swear on my magic and on my life to defend you with all that I am and all that I have. So Mote it be." His magical vow took the form of a deep green ribbon and swirled all about him, before melting into his body. Relaxing for a moment, he paused and took a deep, cleansing breath, as if to consider carefully his next statement. "I'm asking you to trust me and to follow me now."

Hermione closed the small gap that separated them; crushing him in a huge hug. Crying into his shoulder she said, "On my magic and on my life, Harry, I swear that I'm yours now and forever, in this life and the next. So Mote it Be." Her vow, too, took the form of a ribbon - only hers was brown and gold, like the color of her eyes. It bound itself around her wrists and around her body before melting into her and disappearing.

She didn't hesitate when she said, "Of course, I will follow you now."

Fawkes trilled from his perch – a long, warbling trill of happiness. Bending his head, Harry kissed her and realized, in that moment, that he was unspeakably grateful for her love and for the fates that had brought them together. She had bound herself to him and she would be the reason that he'd beat Tom Riddle and the murderers who followed him. Lifting his head up just enough so that he could get the words out, he said "I love you, Hermione. Be my wife?"

The three words – the three most magical words in the world – broke through whatever hesitation she might have felt. Crashing her lips into his, she held him with all the strength she had as she said, "Yes Harry...a thousand times, yes! I love you, too!"

After an indeterminate amount of time, the two finally parted, at least enough so that they could face Hermione's parents. Harry looked at them and they, in turn, finally saw the two young people not so much as individuals as two parts of an unbreakable couple.

"Now that that's settled, we don't have much time to get out of here and get a new place to hide. We can't go to Grimmauld Place and

we can't go back to your home, as sad as that is. The Headmaster knows where that is and neither Hermione nor I know how to do the Fidelius charm yet. That's something we're going to have to work on immediately. I think we should get to Gringotts and figure out what my inheritance is and why the Headmaster was so adamant about keeping me from it."

The two adults nodded. What Harry had to say made sense and they had already committed themselves emotionally to whatever struggles their daughter and son-in-law needed them for. Jake looked at Harry and then towards the bound Headmaster. "What about him?"

Hermione looked over and said, "Let me deal with that. I was thinking about this the other day when Harry and I were practicing DADA."

Harry squeezed her hand gently and then let her do what she was intending. Pulling out her wand, Hermione began a series of incantations when she felt Harry's hand on her shoulder. He whispered in her ear, "Remember what I told you. Feel your magic and then will the magic to do what you want it to do. Your will is the incantation."

Hermione closed her eyes and thought about what her fiancé had just said. It took her several long moments to feel her magic the way that Harry had shown her in the Room of Requirement while they were working on their meditation techniques. When she was finally able to feel it and manipulate it, she felt much lighter – as if she had gotten it right and her magic was giving her good feelings, in order to reinforce what she had done. As she stood over Dumbledore's prone form, she thought about what she was trying to do and then just let her innate magic take over. Soon there was a glowing blue field over his body. Harry smiled at Hermione from where he stood. He could no longer feel the Headmaster's usually palpable magical aura, so he knew that Hermione had successfully created a magical dampening field around the Headmaster.

It was a sneaky damn charm, because it used the witch or wizard's magic against him or her. The more the person magically struggled against the field, the stronger it became. The secret to dispelling it was to absorb it. The person would have to be able to remain very, very calm and rational and fight against his or her instincts to fight

the field in order to defeat it. Whether the Headmaster was able to figure it out was uncertain. It would certainly buy them some significant time for making their get-away.

Once she was finished, she walked over to Harry. "Done. We have about thirty minutes or an hour before he wakes up and then probably at least an hour or more before he figures out what I've created."

Harry nodded. "Good. Let's get going then. I'll make a portkey that will take us to the front steps of Gringotts. From there, we're going to have to run to the front doors. I'm going to disillusion all of us first, so we'll blend into the background. That won't make us invisible, but it will make us much harder to hit. We have to cross only about thirty feet, but I want to give us every chance to get inside intact."

Jake looked a little worriedly at Miranda. For all of her fitness and strength, Miranda was still a Muggle and therefore vulnerable to magical attack in a way that neither Harry nor Hermione were. He wasn't worried for himself, though. He had been a 100-meter sprinter in both high-school and college and had spent time as captain in the SAS. There was very little, in fact, that he was truly fearful of – though some of the things that Harry could do and had already done made him second-guess whether he was someone whom he ought to ever deliberately annoy.

The key to making a Portkey was the specific focus on the target. Much like apparition, the caster had to be able to 'see' the place where he or she wants the Portkey user to land. Since Harry had been to Gringotts a number of times, the mental picture he had was very clear. Certainly clear enough for apparition and therefore clear enough for a Portkey. The actual incantation was something he had heard a number of times from the Headmaster and it took no more effort to make a Portkey than it did to create a rune which would block a Portkey – and that was something he had learned from Sirius directly. It wasn't forbidden knowledge, of course, but it was discouraged. Actively.

From across the room, an unfurled piece of parchment flew to Harry's outstretched hand. He held no wand, and had not uttered the 'necessary' incantation...and it left Remus, Sirius, and Hermione speechless. They had never seen Harry do wandless magic before.

"Harry! How did you do that?"

He turned to face her. "Do what?"

"THAT!" she said, pointing to the piece of parchment in his hand. "How did you summon it without a wand?"

Looking genuinely surprised, Harry faced her. "Oh...I've been doing that since just after the first task. Once I learned how the charm felt, I realized that I didn't need a wand to cast it. I just focus on the object I want to summon and it comes to me."

Remus Lupin stroked his chin thoughtfully for a moment. "You mean, Harry, that you can feel the magic working through your wand the first time you cast a charm or curse and then afterwards, reproduce it because you remember what it feels like when it's done right?"

"Yea, pretty much. Some things are harder to do than others. I really have to concentrate when I'm doing transfiguration without a wand, but otherwise...yea. Most everything else I can do wandlessly really easily."

Sirius Black thought about what his adopted son had just said. He knew that if Harry was being honest and he could really do what he said he could do, then Harry was probably the most powerful wizard in more than a thousand years. It was a staggering revelation...and one that would need to be closely guarded for some time to come, if they were going to win the war against Tom and his followers. He was privately grateful that he'd been able to enforce the clause of James and Lily's will which gave him priority in any custody fight over Harry and had taken the opportunity, just after his legal liberation, to adopt Harry formally. He counted himself lucky that doing so hadn't required Harry's blood and blessed both James and Lily for their foresight in signing their wills in blood; making his efforts both legally and magically binding.

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Once the Weasleys, were piled up together, and had been divested of their wands, potions, and anything else that might be dangerous to Harry and Hermione's cause, Sirius asked Harry if he could make the Portkey, instead. "Wouldn't do to have you making keys, Harry. It's controlled magic and only the official Heads of Houses are

allowed to do it with impunity. As soon as we get to Gringotts and you claim the Potter ring, you'll be able to do it...but before then, it's best if you leave it to me."

Harry couldn't argue with his adopted fathers' logic, so he quietly acquiesced.

The last thing that Harry did before they activated the Portkey was to reach out with his magic and call Gryffindor's sword to him. It had hung too long on the Headmaster's office wall and it was, by dint of the fact that he, himself, had called it forth from the Sorting Hat. It was his and the Headmaster would just have to deal with it. Once the sword was in his hand, Harry looked at Sirius – who simply nodded his support for what Harry had done.

After he had put the sword into his bag, all those who had chosen to support Harry gathered around the long strip of parchment and fell into the 'rabbit hole' the moment that Sirius said the activation phrase. Hermione laughed, as did Harry, when they heard Sirius say, "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date".

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The moment that they appeared in front of Gringotts, the group assumed a defensive posture and quickly made its way to the bank's front doors. Harry entered first, along with Hermione and the Grangers. Remus and Sirius, as well as the Weasley twins were last in the door.

Harry made his way over to the only Goblin he had ever trusted: Griphook. Bowing at the waist once they had made initial eye-contact, Harry said "Good morrow, Most Senior Teller of the Day Griphook. I have need of your services."

The green-brown Goblin looked up from his ledger. "Ah, friend Potter. What brings you to us today?"

"Mutual profit and revenge, friend Griphook. You have always treated me well and I wish to offer you something more than a position as a senior teller."

There were three magical words in the Goblin language. "Profit" and "revenge" were two of them. The third one didn't really have a direct

translation into English...but roughly, it meant "roasting and eating the body of your defeated opponent." For Harry's purposes, two out of three wasn't bad...and it got Griphook's undivided attention.

"Tell me then, friend Potter, how may I be of service?"

"You can help me by taking over management of the Potter family vaults and any other vaults for which I might be heir."

Goblins don't usually blink three times fast, but the bomb that Harry Potter dropped in Griphook's lap was not the usual pronouncement.

Seeing that there was no response forthcoming, Harry bowed at the waist again and said, while not meeting the Goblins' eyes, "I am sorry, friend Griphook. I did not know that my request would be so unwelcome. I will withdraw now and make my apologies to your supervisor for bothering you."

The moment that Harry began backing up, Griphook shook off the overwhelming sense of shock and said, "Wait! Please, friend Potter...let me explain..."

"No need, friend Griphook. I should not have presumed so much. I will go and make my apologies." Harry knew enough to know that offending a Goblin could get a person banned from any further dealings with Gringotts and he wasn't willing to risk that. Better having to face shame for unintentionally insulting a Goblin and make immediate amends for it than be banned for life from the bank and have to deal with the 'financial agents' who could be found in Knockturn Alley.

Griphook was horrified. Harry Potter was about to walk out of the bank...and it would appear to all as though his request had been rejected, even though he – the client - would be the one tendering an apology. Griphook knew that he would be roasted and served for the King's dinner by the end of the day if he didn't rescue the situation quickly.

Risking all, Griphook reached out and put his short, clawed hand on Harry's and said, "Please wait, friend Potter. There is nothing at all for which you need to apologize. If anything, I will have to seek forgiveness from my King for even allowing you to think such a

thing! My hesitancy in answering your question has nothing to do with unwillingness to serve!"

"Then what was it?"

"Friend Potter, if I am to explain all, you must come with me. I cannot say more here. Please, bring your friends and follow me."

Harry turned and looked at Hermione, then Remus Lupin, and at Sirius. Both of the men were staring at Harry with something close to wonder and awe in their eyes. It was as if they were seeing him anew. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, but realized that there was nothing he could do about it for the time being.

Taking Hermione's hand, Harry followed the Goblin through the back section of the bank and then through an enormous, black granite archway. It also bore the famous Gringotts warning; inscribed in one large, ornately carved flat panel over the keystone point of the arch.

A series of turns brought the small party into a much larger hall. Its ceilings were at least twenty feet high and it was done in an almost gothic architectural style, complete with the ribbed vaults and the flying buttresses.

It wasn't exactly pretty, but it seemed eminently functional and it matched the overall feel that Gringotts exuded to most of its depositors.

Coming to a stop in front of a set of gilded double doors, Griphook looked up at Harry. "Friend Potter, here we enter the Hall of the King. Ragnok has not met with human wizards since the last time a Potter came to Gringotts."

"My father?" Harry asked, very quietly.

"Yes, friend Potter. Your father was a very great man and it is because of his efforts and his repeated attempts to protect and defend our King that you and your party are here."

"I never knew." Harry said, unable to make eye contact, for fear that the Goblin might see the tears that had gathered suddenly and were threatening to run down his cheeks.

Griphook looked up at him – which seemed slightly painful for him. Without thinking about it, Harry wiped away his tears and dropped to one knee, so that he could look Griphook in the eye while he shared what he knew. Less quietly, Harry said, "Tell me about him? Please?"

Before he could get the Goblin to say anything, Griphook reached out and put his hand under Harry's forearm and motioned him to stand up again. "Please, friend Potter, it is unseemly for you to be kneeling to me!"

Goggle-eyed, Harry looked at him. "Why? I wanted you to not have to strain to look up at me and it was easier for me to kneel, so I did."

Turning to Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, the diminutive Goblin said, "Did no one teach friend Potter anything about Goblin society? Have things become so bad at Hogwarts that not even the basics are being covered?"

Remus looked down at the Goblin and said, "I'm afraid so, Most Senior Teller of the Day Griphook. There has been, unfortunately, a steady decline in the overall educational levels at the school. It is to wizarding shame that a ghost is still teaching "History of Magic" and that the Muggle-studies teacher has not been into Muggle London in fifty years. Albus Dumbledore has done a very great disservice to wizards and witches everywhere by allowing the situation to continue for so long. Please forgive my godson. He is extraordinary in so many ways...but he is still Muggle-raised and therefore ignorant of a great deal in our world."

Sirius, feeling Remus' lead, said "Most Senior Teller of the Day Griphook, I beg your forgiveness of my adopted son. Harry means well and has his heart most firmly in the right place, but I have not had the chance to teach him, given that I've been free for only a little while and he has been in school for most of that time."

Griphook considered what the two men had said most carefully. If they were telling the truth, and he had no reason to think that they weren't, Harry Potter needed the help that Gringotts could offer even more than he had been told. It was a most dire situation. "My lords, it is already forgotten. I was unaware that things had fallen to such a level. These are things that must be corrected, however, and quickly.

Let us proceed to our meeting. If I am correct, King Ragnok should be free now."

And as he said it, the imposing, golden doors swung open and the two menacing guards stepped aside to allow Griphook, Harry, Hermione, and the rest to enter the smaller, more ornate hall.

Remus Lupin, with his finally honed werewolf senses, could tell that there had been a great deal of death in the hall...but all of it Goblin-on-Goblin. There was not a single trace anywhere of humans. It was a revelation that he would let Harry in on, after they were safely away from the bank.

Harry and Hermione were escorted down the long hall – which was approximately 110 feet – and into a wide, mostly circular room. At the center, with his back to the wall, sat King Ragnok. He was not an imposing Goblin, by any means. At barely four feet, he was taller than most all other Goblins...but short, in comparison to 99.9999% of all humans.

Two things distinguished Ragnok from other Goblins, besides his height. One was that while most Goblins had little or no hair on their heads, Ragnok had a strong and luxuriant plait of deep black hair which began at the nape of his neck and extended all the way up the center of his head to the crown in a style that almost reminded Harry of the Muggle fashion called a 'mohican'. The braid hung down to the middle of his shoulders and was tied off with what Harry was sure was a 22kt. gold band. The other thing that stood out was that he had golden eyes that were almost hypnotic. Harry thought to himself that Ragnok was probably the handsomest Goblin he had ever seen. He was far easier to meet eye-to-eye and less distracting.

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin moved forward, and knelt in front of the King. They were then joined by Harry, Hermione, and the twins. When the Grangers failed to join the others, Griphook looked up at them almost apoplectic. Jake Granger looked at him and said, "We're what you call Muggles, Senior Teller Griphook, and we already have a sovereign queen to whom we owe our allegiance."

Griphook considered that for a moment and then nodded, as if in agreement. Leaving the Grangers where they stood, Griphook moved forward and made abeyance to his king.

"Rise, Griphook. Rise, all. Griphook, for what reason have you bought these humans to me?"

Not daring to meet his lords' eyes, Griphook explained that the young, black-haired boy was Harry Potter; son of Goblin friend, Lord James Potter, and that the boy had brought him a request that only the King could answer.

"Have you now, friend Potter. And what was the request that has Senior Teller Griphook so concerned?"

"Sire, if I may. When I first thought to enter Hogwarts, I came to Gringotts in order to make a small withdrawal and to find out about whatever my parents might have left to me. Senior Teller Griphook answered all of my needs then and has done so every year since that day. I came today and said to him: "You can help me by taking over management of the Potter family vaults and any other vaults for which I might be heir."

Harry looked over to where Griphook stood and his fear was almost palpable. What Harry didn't understand was why he might be so afraid.

Ragnok looked at Harry and then at the party around him. "A most unusual group of friends you have, friend Potter. I've not seen such a collection since your father was here. Of course, two of your number were much younger then."

This earned a small laugh from both Sirius and Lupin. Harry held his own and said, "Sire, time ravages all of us in equal measure. It is the only opponent that Goblins cannot defeat."

Harry's statement startled the monarch and he looked at Harry intently; as if to probe him for something deep inside. "You know our legends, then?"

"Only a small portion, Sire. Professor Binns was occasionally useful, though he spent a great deal of time on the 1600's, while he should have been talking about the 1970's."

"Ah, friend Potter. So you do know more than you let on. Very well, then. We will make sure that more of what you should know is shared with you. However, that's not the reason that you came

today or were brought before me. I think that before you commit yourself to the path, you should know what you are facing. Griphook!"

Griphook immediately fell to one knee in front of his lord. "Yes, my lord?"

"Go at once and fetch back all of the ledgers that friend Potter might need. Bring to me the Book of Families as well and the appropriate bowl."

Griphook almost tripped over himself in his haste to go and gather the things that he had been commanded to retrieve. During his absence, the King looked about the room and began asking Harry and Hermione questions.

"Tell me about your friends here, Harry" the King said, using Harry's given name for the first time.

Harry immediately brightened and then started introducing everyone. "Sire, I believe you already know my Godfather and my adopted dad" pointing to Lupin and then Sirius, "and I believe that you have probably heard of my friends, Fredrick and George Weasley..." Ragnok nodded as both Fred and George made eye contact with the Goblin King for the first time.

"Tell me, Harry, about the remarkable young woman who stands by your side. I know that I've never seen her before."

If Harry's smile could have gotten wider, it would have, as Harry said, "Sire, this is Hermione Jane Granger. However, she will soon be my wife, Hermione Jane, the Lady Potter. She is the top student at Hogwarts and, without a doubt, the smartest witch you, or perhaps any of your people, will ever meet."

Hermione's cheeks flamed a deep crimson as she listened to her fiancée praise her. "Rise, Lady Potter and know that you are also Goblin-friend."

Inclining her head in a show of respect, Hermione said gently, "I thank you, Sire. I will do everything in my power to make sure that you and your tribe never, ever have cause to doubt me."

"I know. I thank you for your words and for the emotion behind them. Our dealings with the wizarding world have never been as easy as they should have been, but you make me believe that there is still hope for that to change."

"Sire? May I introduce you to my parents? They are Muggles, Sire, but they respect me and respect my place in this world."

Ragnok looked Hermione in the eyes and then turned his attention to her parents, who were holding hands and standing, silently, along the back wall of the room. With a wave of his hand, a guard brought Hermione's parents forward, so that they were standing on the deep red carpet which led up to the dais.

"You do not seem afraid" he said, appraising the two. "Does this place not mystify you or make you doubt all the things you have ever been told?"

Miranda bit her tongue; leaving her husband to reply for them both. "Sire, thank you. We were not sure how we would be received, but you have allowed us into your presence and for that, we are grateful."

Ragnok smiled and even laughed a little. "Well spoken. My name is Ragnok and I am King of the Goblins here in what you call Britain. I know a little of your queen. She and I have had some contact in the past. She was kinder than I expected."

Jake and Miranda Granger fairly gasped at the King's admission. They couldn't believe that the Queen of England knew about the magical world, and more, had had contact with the Goblins directly. They began to wonder just how tight the Statute of Secrecy really was or whether it was honored more in the breach than the observance.

Miranda eyes flicked up; just enough to catch the King's eyes. "Yes, Lady Granger? Is there something you wish to ask?"

Blushing at being called 'Lady Granger', Miranda nodded slightly and then said, "Sire, it seems that my daughter's betrothed is somehow important to both our world and yours. Can you tell us why this is? You seem to know more than the rest of us."

Sitting further back into his throne, Ragnok looked around. His eyes wandered first to Remus Lupin, then to Sirius Black, and finally rested on Harry himself. "What say you, friend Potter? Would you have them know what Dumbledore's 'greater good' is?"

Harry was unsure, but he thought that more information was better than less and thought that whatever it was, he could face it, if he had Hermione, Sirius, and Remus in his corner. Clearing his throat, Harry said, "Yes, Sire. I would just as soon have them all know, if it means that they can help me with whatever it is."

The King seemed inclined to agree and then said, "Good then, friend Potter. I will tell you all that I know. There is a prophecy....about you and the one who calls himself 'Voldemort'."

There were suddenly several audible intakes of breath at the Dark Lord's name, but the Goblin King ignored it. "The prophecy, as far as we've been able to ascertain, says that you and the Dark Lord have to face each other and that neither can fully live while the other does. The complete wording is uncertain, but we know this much. The prophecy said that he will 'mark you as his equal' and that you 'will have a power that the dark lord knows not'. We assume that no one else can kill either of you, but of that we are not certain." The King hesitated before continuing. "Here is the hard part, friend Potter. We do know that the scar that you are carrying on your forehead is not just a scar, but rather a bit of the dark lord's soul. It must be removed for you to be truly whole and have complete access to your magic."

Hermione was almost apoplectic at the King's pronouncement and threw herself into Harry's arms; crying as she did so.

Ragnok smiled a smile of actual understanding. "Tell your bond-mate not to worry, friend Potter. We have curse-breakers here at the bank who know how to deal with this matter. It's a simple matter of finding an object that can be enchanted to receive the soul-fragment and then forcing it out of you and into the vessel. Once that has been done, the Horcrux can be destroyed relatively safely."

Remus Lupin and Sirius Black were in shock over what they had just heard...until they realized the implications and why Voldemort had bragged to Harry that he had 'walked further down the path towards immortality than any other wizard alive.'

It made sense...sick, twisted sense...but sense none-the-less. Sirius figured it out a moment ahead of Lupin and in his excitement called out, "Harry! We can beat him!"

His outburst might have caused them all grief if the King wasn't the sort to be forgiving – but he was – and so the exclamation went by, unremarked.

Harry turned and looked quizzically at Sirius, as if to say, "Huh?"

"Horcruxes, Harry, Horcruxes! That's how Voldemort has 'walked further down the path towards immortality than any other wizard alive'. That's what he's made and I bet anything that he's made more than one!"

Harry was still not sold, but the King interposed himself, if only verbally. "Your father is probably right, Harry. If the dark lord is trying to make himself immortal, then it makes sense that this dark lord would have made more than one. The question is how many more than one."

It was Hermione who supplied the ready answer. "Seven, Sire. I will bet all that I know that there are seven fragments. One in him and six hidden."

Harry smiled, recognizing immediately the truth that had been staring him in the face. "Actually, love, it's five."

Hermione looked at him...and then there was cognition of what had to be the truth. "Oh yes, Harry! That's got to be it!"

Sirius and Remus looked at Hermione from where they were standing and seemed a little bit lost. Even the King was looking unsure. Harry stopped and stood back about a half-step, so that he could face them all. "It's five" he told the group, "And here's why. At the end of my second year, when I faced Voldemort – his real name is Tom Riddle, by the way – I ended up winning because I destroyed a diary; a private journal – that had belonged to Riddle when he was a young man. When I stabbed it with the broken off tooth from the Basilisk which Riddle had summoned, the solid form of Riddle was destroyed and Ginny Weasley was restored to health. Riddle was using Ginny's life-energies to restore himself to a body...and I'm

betting that the journal contained one of the soul fragments. It's the only way he could have come back."

Looks of shock and wonder raced around the room as each person pondered the story. The Weasley twins appeared to be almost beside themselves with awe and respect for Harry and what he had accomplished. They also immediately wondered if there was still a dead Basilisk under the school that they could harvest. They thought about all the things that basilisk parts could be used for and what those parts might fetch on the open market...and goggled in wonder at the immense wealth that was just lying there. Immediately, the twin brothers began to formulate a plan....

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, on the other hand, were shaking with both rage at the Headmasters' ineptitude and fear/sadness from having been so close to losing Harry without ever having had the chance to get to know him. Both men were frighteningly protective of James and Lily's only son and the full force of those emotions swept over and through them both.

Jake and Miranda Granger, on the other hand, marveled at the power and humility that their only daughters' betrothed showed. Each saw the look in their daughters' eyes and knew, without a doubt, that she would charge the gates of hell themselves, if it meant protecting Harry. They also saw that he felt the same way and that he was completely willing to lay down his life to protect her. For that kind of love alone, they could ask no more of their God.

The King, for his part, sat back on his throne and contemplated what he had just been told. It was a remarkable story and, since he had no reason to doubt its truthfulness, made him wonder...and not for the first time...whether something had gone very seriously wrong at Hogwarts and within the British wizarding community as a whole. Having a twelve year-old boy fight a Basilisk was something that not even Goblins would require during training...at least until much, much later on. If Harry Potter was Dumbledore's 'secret weapon', then he had been hugely careless with the way the boy was treated.

Asking the question that he hoped would break the tension that had filled the room, the King said, "Friend Potter, just how large was the Basilisk? We had heard that there was a monster that lived under the Castle, but we'd never been able to establish the veracity of the story."

Harry scuffed the carpet with his toe for a moment and then looked at Hermione; unsure of whether he really wanted to tell the Goblin-King the truth. It was Hermione's nod and the soft caress of her hand in his that told him that she supported him and thought he ought to be honest.

Lifting his eyes to meet the Kings' gaze, he said quietly, "Sire, its neck-ridge came up to my shoulder and its fangs were as long as my arm. I don't know exactly how long it was...but when I drove the sword up through the top of its mouth, I was looking at it face to face from twenty-five feet up. If I had to guess, I'd say it was probably sixty or sixty-five feet."

Stunned, the King looked at him, wondering if even his very best warrior would have fared half as well as the young man before him had. And, wryly, he mused about whether the boy knew of the enormous value of a basilisk carcass that large. Probably not, he thought. He knew there was profit to be had, if the boy was willing to turn over the rendering of the great snake to them, but put the thought of asking out of his mind. It wasn't the time to bring it up. Perhaps later, after he's received his inheritance.

It was at that precise moment – when the King was about to laud Harry for what had to be the greatest act of heroism in a twelve year-old that he had ever heard of - that the doors to the throne room opened again. If Harry had known what the King was about to say to him, in front of Hermione and the others, he would have asked the King not to do so. The one thing that Harry couldn't stand was being recognized for things over which Harry had had no choice or events into which he had been forced. Like the Tri-Wizard Tournament...or the duel after Voldemort's resurrection. Fame was not something he wanted, needed, or ever sought out, and it was just as well that the Kings' thoughts and praise for his actions went unvoiced.

Griphook bore, in his short, clawed hands, the items that his King had requested. One was an overly-large, grey, leather-bound book, and the other was a small, silver bowl with ornate runes carved in the side, in bas-relief.

Waving a hand, the King conjured a table and directed Griphook place the bowl and the book upon it. When he looked up, he saw the

assembled group looking at him in fascination. When he saw their eyes flicking to the table and then back at him, he grinned. "Ah, yes. You humans are so presumptuous about magic. Your Wizengamot, for all their arrogance and pomposity, didn't realize that most races that are magical don't need or want wands and that their supposed 'ban' on ownership of wands by non-human species affects us not at all."

Harry was about to ask if house-elves and Goblins were related and then realized how awful such a question could sound. It was, however, a question to which he thought the answer might be very, very enlightening and promised himself that he would ask Hermione what she thought after they had left the bank.

Turning to Harry, Ragnok said, "Well, friend Potter, are you ready to be tested?"

Nervously, Harry stepped a half a pace forward and said, with as much dignity as he could muster, "Sire, if it helps my cause or serves our friendship, then I am ready for anything."

That caused the King's almost non-existent left eyebrow to try to rise considerably, without immediate success. "You presume our friendship, Harry?"

"No, Sire, but I offer mine to you." Harry said, hoping that it was the right answer. It was.

"Good. Then Griphook was correct in bringing you to me. We shall deal with that afterwards. Let us now be about figuring out which families you can claim as your own."

"What must I do, Sire?"

Producing a small, wickedly sharp-looking knife from a hidden sheath, Ragnok said, "Hold out your hand, Harry, palm upward. I will make a small cut in its center. When the blood gathers, turn your hand over and pour it into the bowl. It will do the rest."

Not a stranger to pain or to cuts, Harry willingly held out his hand. Carefully, Ragnok slid the blade across Harry's palm; making slices in perpendicular directions. The blade was so sharp that Harry felt it

not at all – at first. The sting of the cuts grated on his nerves after a minute or so, but by then, the blood had gathered in his hand such that it covered the same area as a gold galleon. Gently, the King bade him turn his hand over and pour the blood into the bowl.

Once he did so, Sirius, who had been looking on in fascination, whispered the incantation, 'Epsikey', which sealed the cuts on Harry's palm painlessly.

Harry almost didn't notice what was happening with the book. Once his blood hit the bowl, a dark red vapor gathered; formed a cloud above the bowl, and then completely covered the book; seeping into what seemed to be every pore and crack. The book's pages opened, as if on their own, there was immediately a 'leafing through' action - as if someone was trying to fan him or herself with the pages – until the book appeared to settle on a particular page. It flopped open and then lay there, unmoving.

Ragnok, Harry, Hermione, Sirius, and Remus all looked down to see what the book said.

At the top of the page, there was a title which read, "Harry James Potter" and next to it was written "Hermione Jane Potter". There were empty boxes below their names which Harry thought were probably meant for children. He blushed as he looked over at Hermione. She was staring at the same page, her mouth agape, and her eyes twinkling madly. It was clear that she liked the idea.

The book began moving again and the next page it landed on said "Potter Family Tree" at the top. Harry's name was listed at the bottom, below the names of James and Lily Potter. There was what appeared to be a straight-line connection back to the very earliest Potters. The date at the top of the tree said, "563 B.C". Hermione's eyes went wide as she saw the date. Harry knew as well as Hermione, that Ollivander's shop dated back to 382 B.C and his was the oldest shop in all of wizarding Britain. That made the Potters 119 years older...and marked him as the only remaining member of the oldest (recorded) family in the country.

The book started moving again and this time, settled on "Evans Family Tree". Again, Harry's name appeared at the bottom, as the only survivor of the family.

It would have been nice, Harry thought, if the book had left it at that, but it didn't. The next family, though, was the shocker. It said, "Gryffindor Family Tree" and listed both Harry's and Neville Longbottom's names at the bottom. They were each descended from one of Godric Gryffindor's sons. Harry's line traced back to Brian Wulfric Gryffindor and Neville's to his younger brother (by eleven months), Alfred James Gryffindor. Grinning, Harry thought about how much fun it was going to be to tell Neville the good news about his true heritage.

Even Ragnok seemed impressed when the book opened to its final page and listed all of the family vaults to which Harry could lay claim:

Gryffindor (half-share)

Potter (Full share)

Evans (Full share)

Warren (Full share)

Draven (Full share)

Black (lord-elect)

Looking at the list, Harry wondered if anyone else had any idea of just what his holdings might be. Hermione seemed to be of the same mind and stepped close to him, so that she could take his hand in hers again. "It'll be all right, Harry. I promise."

"I know, love, I know. With you here...." He left the rest unsaid. There was no point in belaboring just how much he loved her and trusted that she'd help him make the right decisions.

Sirius put his hand on Harry's shoulder; causing Harry to be momentarily startled. "It's going to be all right, Harry. Remus and I promise that we'll do everything we can to help."

Ragnok stepped a little closer, too, and said – looking up at both Harry, Hermione, and the two men – "For what it's worth, friend Potter, I am glad that you have had your bond-mate, your father and your godfather here today. This might have been a difficult

revelation without them. There is much to do, if you are going to execute all of these wills and lay claim to the associated vaults."

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There was a great deal to do and four hours later, after signing what had felt like two thousand sheets of parchment, Harry Potter and his willing entourage emerged onto the marble steps of Gringotts Bank, considerably wealthier than any of them could have ever imagined. Fred and George Weasley had each received fifty thousand galleons, with Harry's grateful thanks for all the support they had given him...not to mention the fact that they had seen how stupid their family had been and chosen to do what was right, rather than what was easy. Harry gave Remus Lupin five hundred thousand galleons and the entire Draven estate – which meant that the 'old wolf' wouldn't have to work ever again, if he lived modestly and invested wisely.

Hermione's parents had been given the equivalent of five hundred thousand pounds Sterling and the promise that they would never, ever want for money again.

Sirius Black had the Black fortune – but got the one thing that money could not buy: Harry's love and a promise that no matter what else happened, he would always be the person Harry turned to for answers and for direction.

Hermione's gifts were the easiest in some ways. Harry found in the Potter vault the one thing that he knew would make her happiest: his mother's engagement ring and wedding band, along with a promise that they would be married (publicly) before the year was out. Harry also gave her a Gringotts medallion that she could wear as a necklace, so that there would never be a doubt about her rights at the bank.

By the time that they had finished, their sacks were laden with galleons and they were all wondering what life had in store for them next.

Harry was torn between trying to get out of the country immediately and going around and recruiting other supporters. He knew that Neville, Luna Lovegood, Padma and Parvati Patil, Susan Bones, and many others would probably flock to him, if he called them. He

also knew that members of the Order of the Phoenix were aware of most all of his friendships and would be trying to get to Harry through any or all of them. He wondered, too, if people like Emmeline Vance and Nymphadora Tonks would side with him or Dumbledore.

As they made their way down the steps of Gringotts, in order to get outside of the anti-Portkey wards, Harry thought about what they were all facing. It was bad enough to be opposed by someone like Tom Riddle. He was a psychopathic megalomaniac and a sadist. That Harry understood, after a fashion. Albus Dumbledore, on the other hand, was a completely unknown quantity. There was so much about the man that was hidden or known only apocryphally. He was a 'puzzle surrounding a mystery, wrapped in an enigma'. That made him both dangerous and unpredictable.

Once the group was at the correct spot, they quickly put their hands to the modified Portkey and disappeared. Their next destination was going to be interesting, to say the least.

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From Chapter One:

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The whole crew tumbled to the ground as the portkey released them, and each stood to brush the dirt of the road from his or her clothes.

In front of them were high carbon-steel gates that looked like it might take a tank or similar piece of heavy equipment to even dent them. The principal gate was anchored on either side by huge granite monoliths that must have weighed, Harry figured, in excess of twenty tons. He knew that only because they looked like they were about the size of the pillars on Easter Island and those were known to be in the twenty-ton range.

In the center of the main gate was an ornately crafted "L", which Harry had to assume stood for "Longbottom".

All around the gates was a fine, tightly-woven magical field that was palpable even ten feet away. If he was right it would almost certainly keep out anything short of a serious, invading army that was equipped with more than a few ward-breakers. Hermione seemed to feel the intense magical energies as well. Her reaction wasn't what Harry expected though. He thought that she might have been curious enough to want to examine them up close, but he found that it was just the opposite. The field was driving her away and she wanted nothing more than to hide in his arms, at a very considerable distance away from the gate.

Fortunately Sirius and Remus knew what to do. Putting their wands in close proximity, they touched the field at a specific point. Harry and Hermione watched as the field first flared and then seemed to change in character. Instead of actively pushing them away, it seemed to decide that just keeping them at a distance was sufficient.

Soon enough, Neville Longbottom, in the company of his great-grandmother, Augusta Longbottom, came walking down the long driveway. As soon as Neville saw Harry and Hermione, he began speaking animatedly to Augusta. With a flick of her wand, the wards fell and Harry, Hermione, and the rest were able to cross through the now open gateway and up the driveway towards their friend.

"Harry!" Neville called out to him. "What are you all doing here?"

Harry, and then Hermione, took the last twenty feet between them at almost a run. Hermione stopped short as Harry closed the last four feet and hugged his friend in a strong embrace. They had become very close during the Tournament, if for no other reason than the fact that Ron had become such a prat over the whole business of Harry's unwilling, and therefore forced, participation in the Tournament. It was Ron's jealousy over the 'fame' and 'fortune' that Harry might gain – issues that became especially apparent after Harry came close to winning the second task – that got in the way of even the possibility of a continuing friendship.

Neville, on the other hand, already had money, as he was in line to be the sole inheritor of a fairly substantial family fortune, and didn't care whether Harry won another thousand galleons or not. Additionally, and to his huge credit (in Harry's eyes, at least), Neville wisely saw that the 'fame' part of winning the Tri-Wizard Tournament was NOT worth the costs that were associated with the win. Going up against a Hungarian Horntail was just completely over-the-top as far as Neville was concerned and Harry was a MUCH braver wizard than he for even having lived to tell about the experience.

When Harry and Neville separated, their grins were still solidly in place. "Harry! I'm really glad to see you here! I didn't expect you to come calling. I've got a lot to tell you."

That was the moment when Neville and his great grandmother saw Sirius Black. Their posture went from welcoming to defensive. Wands came out and the warm welcome-that-was-about-to-be

became a not-so-pleasant confrontation. Both Harry and Remus had to vouch for Sirius before they would accept him and welcome him in their home.

Once Sirius' presence was accepted, they were able to push forward with other, more important matters.

Harry immediately noticed that Neville looked taller, more confident than he had several days earlier. The thing that was immediately apparent, other than his new wand, was that he was wearing a ring on his finger. It was one that Harry had never seen before. It looked suspiciously like the kind of rings Harry was wearing from the Evans, Warren, Potter, and Gryffindor families, though.

Harry grinned. He had a HUGE surprise for his friend and he was dying for the chance to spring it on him. Hermione saw his grin and could make a pretty good guess what he was thinking.

Harry's hand quietly found Hermione's and then he looked at his friend. "Well, Prince Gryffindor, I've got a few things to tell you as well!"

Neville eyed him suspiciously. "Prince Gryffindor? Exactly what are you getting me into this time, Harry?"

Harry broke into a full-belly laugh that and even Hermione chortled at the way Neville said it.

Holding out the ring-box which he had extracted surreptitiously from his left-hand cloak pocket, Harry said, "I think you might find this fits you well".

Neville looked at the dark blue box with the Gringotts logo on it for a moment and then took it from Harry's hand. Opening it so that he could see it in the sunlight, Neville's mouth gaped open as he realized that it was an 'heir-apparent' ring.

He tried to form the word "whose?" but was somehow unable to get his mouth around anything more than an 'eep'.

Walking over to where her great-grandson was standing, Augusta Longbottom peered inquisitively at the small, open box in his right hand.

She, too, fell silent as she looked at the ring. Unlike her great-grandson though, Augusta knew immediately which house its symbols represented and was shocked by it. At one hundred and twenty four, she had seen much and had learned much; especially about the nature and traditions of the so-called 'pureblood' families. While Gryffindor's line had certainly not been one hundred percent pure, it was a great deal more so than other lines... if only because it was so diverse and had touched so many other lines across Western Europe during the last millennium.

Augusta turned to Harry and said quietly, but with a note of firmness that implied that she expected an answer, "How did you come by this ring?"

"Ragnok gave me mine and now I'm giving Neville his", Harry said without pretense.

A number of pieces fell into place all at once for the matriarch of the Longbottom clan and she had to resist the tremendous urge to fall to one knee in front of Harry.

"You are Lord Gryffindor as well then?" she asked, respectfully.

Assessing the matriarch, Harry nodded. "Yes, by dint of my line tracing to the elder brother, Brian Wulfric Gryffindor".

At that, the Gryffindor ring appeared on Harry's right hand, in place of the Potter ring he had just been wearing, and Harry held it up, so that it could be seen. Hermione gasped as she felt a ring appear on her finger – that she had never seen before – and certainly not placed there. She held it up to look at it, causing Harry's jaw to drop as he saw the petite ring glint in the sun.

Augusta saw it too and she immediately realized what it meant. Hermione was Harry's mate, whether they had done the bonding ceremony or not. She was shocked that the last of the Potters had taken a Muggle-born girl to wife. She knew it was going to cause a great deal of consternation in many quarters, even as people tried to swallow and digest the news that her great-grandson, Neville, was the heir-apparent of the Gryffindor line.

"Put it on, Neville", Augusta said, somewhat more sharply than she really felt.

Neville did so, feeling the ring war with the ring that was already on his hand – the ring of the Lord-apparent for the Longbottom family. The Gryffindor line won, but the ring took on some of the symbology of House Longbottom; a European wolverine and an interlocking, English Ivy vine. Those two items wove themselves around the crown of the golden Sapphire stone which dominated the center of the ring.

By this time, Sirius, Remus, the Weasley Twins, and Hermione's parents had gathered around Harry, Hermione, Neville, and Augusta. Remus and Sirius saw what was happening and were both quietly shocked by what they were seeing. Miranda and Jake Granger didn't know exactly what they were seeing, but they both knew, almost instinctively, that it was important and would probably dramatically affect their future.

The Twins, for their part, didn't know precisely what they were seeing, but knew enough that it registered with them that a determination for head-of-house status was being made and that the outcome was important.

When everything was settled, Neville looked at Harry with sort of a 'what do we do now' expression.

"Congratulations, Prince Gryffindor!" is what Harry should have said. Instead, he settled for, "Brilliant!"

Hermione giggled. Sometimes, Harry was just such a boy.

The group began to clap and quickly, Neville seemed to relax and accept the change that had just happened in his life.

"Well then, perhaps after that bit of drama, we should go up to the house and talk about this" Augusta said.

Remus and Sirius looked at the Longbottom matriarch and smiled. Both of them had grown up with her ferocity as well as her friendship, because of James' family ties to the Longbottoms.

The group turned almost as one body and walked towards the enormous, white, Tudor-style home. As they walked, Neville sidled up to Harry and Hermione. "How long?" he said to them both.

"Less than two hours, give or take", Hermione answered, smiling.

That caused Neville to raise one eyebrow at them, as if to say, "Huh?"

Harry cuffed him on the arm with his free hand, as his other hand was happily intertwined with Hermione's.

"You can't have missed it, Neville... please tell me that you didn't miss it?" Harry said, teasing his friend gently.

Neville flushed and said nothing for a moment. Hermione and Harry both laughed and even the Twins, who were walking on the other side of Neville, laughed. Finally, he gave up and said, "Yes! Alright already. So I missed it. What's the big deal?"

They were almost at the huge, imposing double front doors when Harry turned to him and, pulling Hermione close, said, "It's all right, Neville. It's just that we thought it was really obvious that Hermione and I fell in love early on and that we've always been 'it' for each other."

"I've been a bit... preoccupied", Neville said in his own defense. It was Hermione and Harry's turn to be a bit befuddled. Seeing the looks of confusion, Neville turned and said, "C'mon in. I'll explain inside."

Opening the huge doors, Neville led the group into the grand entranceway. It was done in tasteful dark woods, with curving double-staircases sweeping up from either side to the open, balustraded second-floor landing. The floor of the entranceway was done not in Marble, as Harry had seen at Hogwarts, but in highly polished, dark green, igneous Basalt. It was, as Harry had learned in primary school, a very heavy, dense stone that could be used in building.

Once everyone was inside, Neville waved his hand and the doors closed behind them. Hermione gasped and pointed to Neville's

wand, which was still in his pocket. "That was wandless, Harry! Did you see that?"

Harry squeezed her hand in acknowledgement. "I saw, love. Neville and I are almost of the same power level. Tom marked me, but he could have just as easily marked Neville. Prophecy, remember?" His voice was barely a whisper, but Hermione heard it just fine.

Neville turned to face the group, along with his great grandmother and said, "Welcome to House Longbottom." It was a formal greeting, used by 'pureblood' families to let visitors know that they had nothing to fear from the magics which protected their homes.

Sirius and Remus put their hands on Harry and Hermione's shoulders and spoke quickly into their ears. When they were done, the four said together, "Thank you for your hospitality. We thank you for your welcome to House Longbottom."

It was the traditional response and had to be given, so that peace of acknowledged hospitality was invoked.

The Twins joined them in the response, leaving the Grangers alone in not returning the greeting. Augusta realized it and walked over to Hermione's parents. She took out her wand and tapped each of them in turn, saying "the Peace of House Longbottom is upon you."

Not understanding what was happening, Harry turned to Sirius. Catching his godson's expression, Sirius mouthed the word, "Later" to him. Harry nodded and turned back to Hermione. She was standing close to him and he couldn't resist doing the thing that came naturally. He bent his neck slightly and kissed her.

Hermione was surprised by Harry's show of affection, but didn't at all object to it. Her mouth opened slightly and their tongues met and intertwined as they shared the moment of intimacy. Eventually though, both Harry and Hermione felt hands on their shoulders, gently but insistently forcing them apart.

"Remember where you are, Harry. There's a time and place for everything" Sirius said in his godson's ear. It was a well-founded piece of advice. Augusta Longbottom was looking at Harry and Hermione and it was a disapproving look, as if she were a stern aunt who expected better of her nephew.

Hermione squeezed his hand and tried to reassure him that it was alright.

"If you're finished, Lord Gryffindor", emphasizing the word, with the clear message implied that he'd better be finished, "I'd like to introduce you to a couple of people who have become important in my great grandson's life." Neville was blushing and both Harry and Hermione wondered what was going on. The Twins, as well, wondered what they were about to see.

Turning her back, Augusta looked up the stairs. "Ladies?"

A moment later, Padma and Parvati Patil, along with Susan Bones appeared. Each was wearing a flattering, but tasteful summer dress and each was wearing a similar-looking necklace. They came down the stairs, hand in hand, and moved to stand next to Neville.

"Lord and Lady Gryffindor, Lord Black, Lord Lupin, Messrs. Weasley, may I present to you Padma, Parvati Patil and Susan Bones, the Ladies Longbottom?"

Harry, Hermione and the rest were gobsmacked by the fact that Neville was pledged to three girls and completely missed the fact that the Longbottom Matriarch had completely failed to address Hermione's parents as a part of the group. It was a slight that they would not have expected – but it was not completely unexpected, either.

What was neither expected nor anticipated from the notoriously shy, almost reticent fellow Gryffindor was that he was grinning, even as he held hands with the three. Padma, Parvati, and Susan looked very, very happy and secure. Happier than either Harry or Hermione had seen, in fact, since they started school together.

"When?" Harry asked, the same question that Neville had asked him a few minutes earlier.

Augusta heard Harry's question and stepped in saying, "Neville had approached Susan, Parvati, and Padma during the spring semester, Lord Gryffindor, and I've given them all my blessing to seek a marriage bond as soon as Neville turns sixteen. Amelia has already given her blessing, as has Parvati and Padma's father. I approached

Sumerendra Bahadur Rana, the girls' grand uncle in the Sixth Gurkha Rifles, and he acted as intermediary for the negotiations."

Both Sirius and Remus looked at Neville with something approaching envy, as they had always talked about what it might be like to have a couple of women in their lives, but had never had the good fortune to be able pursue it. Now they were seeing a young man, of no notable achievements, involved with three girls – and two of them, twins!

Miranda and Jake Granger watched the situation unfold and thought about how lucky their daughter was to be involved with no one but Harry. They had no idea that Hermione felt differently about the situation and they wouldn't know, at least until it was too late for them to do anything about it.

Augusta clapped her hands twice to get the groups' attention. Once she had it, she said, "I'd like to have all of you join us at dinner, which will be served in an hour. Until then, please make yourselves comfortable in the rooms upstairs and to the right. That entire wing is yours while you are here"

Each was happy enough to be able to take the pressure off for the hour that they had before dinner. There would be much to talk about that was serious and there were decisions that Neville and his wives were going to have to make that would affect their lives, for better or for worse.

Holding hands, Harry and Hermione made their way up the stairs, headed towards whatever bedroom appealed most. Jake and Miranda watched from twenty feet away, not knowing whether it was proper or not for them to want to 'counsel' their daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law about how far they were allowed to go in exploring each other. Jake wanted to curtail any intimate activities between the two for several years to come (since they were only 15 and 16, respectively), while Miranda wanted only for Hermione to be careful and to take her time, so that she didn't rush into anything she'd regret later on. What neither knew, because they were Muggles, was that the power of the oaths that Harry and Hermione had sworn to each other would also protect each from emotional or physical abuse by the other.

As Remus and Sirius climbed the stairs, they fell into the easy camaraderie that had marked their early friendship at Hogwarts, in the days before Voldemort made his presence felt in Britain. Both saw how close Harry and Hermione were to each other and both grinned. It was easy for both to tell what the other was thinking: Just like James and Lily.

Sirius knew that Remus – his best living friend – could smell things that others couldn't, because of his 'little, furry problem'. "What do you smell, Moony?"

Remus blinked and looked at him. "Oh, she's all over him like a bad rash. He's the same way. They'll be fully intimate in a year, if not sooner. However, in the mean time...." He wiggled his ears, as only a lycanthrope can do.

Lord Sirius Black threw his head back and roared with laughter; barely catching himself on the banister railing as he fell back. One thing he loved about Remus was the man's extraordinarily dry wit. With a turn of phrase or a certain emphasis on a particular word, he could imply the most amazing, funniest things. In this case, he was no-so-subtly suggesting that Harry and Hermione were going to do 'everything but' when it came to intimacy and that it hardly mattered really whether they waited or not. His ear-wagging also implied strongly that he thought it was entertaining to see the two teenagers so hot and bothered for each other, because it was so very much like Harry's parents when they were together.

"You alright there, Padfoot?"

Holding his side from laughing, he said, "Yes, Moony. I'm fine. You gotta stop it with the ears, though. You're going to kill me one of these days!"

Harry and Hermione, who had reached the top of the stairs, turned and stared at the both of them; giving them both a look of 'what gives?' Sirius waved them off when he realized that they were being watched.

Shrugging, the two teens resumed their march towards a room in the guest wing where they could crash. Each of them had a ton of questions regarding Neville and his relationships with the Patil twins as well as Susan Bones and neither was going to let the matter rest

without further exploration. Hermione's curiosity centered on the group dynamic and how each of the girls felt about Neville and each other, while Harry's thoughts tended towards what Neville planned to do about Hogwarts, Dumbledore (after Harry fully informed him about what had just happened to them less than five hours ago), and the worsening situation in Britain – a/k/a the newly reborn Riddle and his merry band of homicidal maniacs.

It didn't take long for Harry and Hermione to find a room they liked and an even shorter time for Hermione to close, lock, and seal the room against any intrusion, parental or otherwise.

Her actions earned her an arched eyebrow from Harry and then a 'come-hither' look, as he realized that they had, for the moment, complete privacy. Remus, Sirius, and Lady Longbottom together might be able to take down her enchantments, but she knew they wouldn't – unless it was a life-or-death situation.

Flopping back on the bed, Harry reached out with both hands and pulled his new fiancé to him, for what promised to be a very, very satisfying snog.

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6:27 P.M. - Office of the Headmaster – Hogwarts - June 18, 1995

Albus Dumbledore had fought the charm which encased him for more than six hours, growing weaker by the moment, before he finally sussed out what had been done to him. Grudging admiration for what had been done to him tinged his anger towards Hermione Jane Granger. Her spell-work had been both subtle and complex; far and away above N.E.W.T-standard.

Struggling to stand up, he looked around and tried to figure out what had happened in his office. The first thing he saw was a 'stack of Weasleys' - each of the Weasleys bound tightly with corded rope and stacked, more or less side by side, in one corner of his office. He looked around and tried to find his potions-master. His magical signature was nowhere to be found and it alarmed him.

Fawkes looked down at him from where he sat on his perch and for a moment, Albus Dumbledore thought that his familiar was angry at

him. His eyes were fixed on him, unblinking, and he ruffled his feathers in what appeared to be significant annoyance.

As he moved around to the back of his desk, he felt his side twinge with significant pain, and he immediately remembered what Jake Granger – a Muggle – had done to him. It angered him in ways that he could not describe that a bloody, awful, useless Muggle had crippled him, however temporarily, and caused him to lose his first fight in over fifty years. Not just lose the fight, but as a consequence, lose his wand as well – and that was the loss that stung the most. That wand was life. Without it, he was just a high-powered wizard; not the almost invincible wizard that he had been since defeating Grindelwald.

It was a tragic, irreplaceable loss. It made everything that he had to do orders of magnitude more difficult and complicated his whole plan for Harry. 'Damn, damn, damn, damn'

Dumbledore swiveled his chair about and looked at the small objects that lined the shelves behind his desk. They were or at least had been, tied to Harry in a variety of ways. One that he was particularly proud of, the one he had just created, used some of Harry's blood – which Dumbledore had found splattered on the ground outside the fake-Moody's office, just after Harry had returned from his confrontation with Riddle in Little Hangleton.

The other one that was useful, about which the Ministry might be particularly unhappy, was tied directly to Harry's magical core, allowing him to know if Harry was alive or dead, and how strong he was, both physically and magically. It used blood taken from not just Harry, but both of his parents. It was magic so strong as to be almost impossible to defeat. But 'almost impossible' was not 'completely impossible'. There were ways, he knew, that it could be circumvented – but they all required that Harry have family members with whom he could bond. Without James and Lily, Harry was without family... at least none who were close enough to him either matri- or patrilineally to make a difference.

He couldn't tell where Harry was at the moment, which told him that the young man was either hiding at a place that was protected by the Fidelius or by other wards that were both most subtle and more complex. Some of the most powerful families had wards like that.

Then, as he thought about it, he realized that there were only three places that Harry might go that had wards of that type: the Black family manor, Potter Castle, and the Longbottom estate.

As he thought about it further, he realized that if Sirius was with him, he was most likely then at the Black family manor. That put Harry out of reach for the moment. But it didn't put Hermione Granger or her family out of reach, unless they were travelling with Harry.

Hermione Granger was the really complicating factor, he knew. She gave Harry access to information and analysis that he'd not have otherwise. More, she gave him the one thing that could not be begged for, borrowed, or stolen: She gave him courage and hope. Albus knew, because it was a lesson he had learned during the war against Grindelwald, that if a man had hope, you could not break him... no matter what you did to him. Even the dreaded 'Imperious' curse could not permanently ensnare a man or woman's mind if he or she still had hope.

As he thought about his options, the plan was eventually reduced to the simple formula: Kill Hermione and make Harry lose hope. Then point Harry at Voldemort and clean up afterwards. It was that simple.

The first thing he had to do though, before he could put any plan into action, was to find his potions-master. Severus was useful to him, even if he fought against the Headmaster's control every step of the way. Not only did Severus give him vital information about the activities of the other death eaters, but now he could provide critical information about Riddle himself.

Dumbledore smiled when he thought about the quid-pro-quo that he had 'arranged' to make it all possible. One botched potions-experiment early on, which had been ridiculously easy to arrange, and the consequent exposure to a particularly nasty, long-acting bit of potions-based magic, and the Headmaster had himself a virtual slave. From that moment onwards, Severus would do anything to receive his weekly dosage of antidote from the Headmaster and would never willingly compromise his access to it. That made the man both pliable and extremely foul-tempered. That, unfortunately, meant that he was an extremely bad teacher... even to the point where each house had had to resort to having weekly meetings, organized by year, with potions-tutors. The tutors were the only thing

standing between the students and utter and complete chaos and failure on both the OWL's and N.E.W.T's.

The Headmaster's reverie went on for another minute or two before it was broken by the sound of one of the portrait's occupants trying to get his attention.

"Headmaster?"

"HEADMASTER?" the voice said, a bit louder.

"ALBUS!" Everard practically yelled.

Finally, Albus turned around, as if surprised, and gazed at the painting of the former Headmaster. "Yes, Everard? Why are you yelling?"

"Because you're growing deaf, you doddering old bat! Now pay attention. If you're looking for Severus Snape, I'm afraid you're out of luck. Just before I ducked out of my painting here, just after noon, once you had been defeated, I had the misfortune to see what happened to the 'greasy git' as the students like to call him."

Dumbledore looked at the magical echo of the pallid, pasty-faced wizard and tried to think of ways that he could use to burn the portrait that he might be able to get past the Board of Governors of the school before saying, "Well? Get on with it."

Everard 'hurrumphed' and then said, with no little satisfaction, "Black killed him. Severus missed with an Unforgiveable and then Black sliced his throat. It was like a fountain of red in here. That's when I bolted. I didn't want to give him reason to start destroying our portraits."

The former Headmaster's cowardice was near-legendary, despite what the Ministry said about him and so Dumbledore believed him. However, that left a massive, gaping hole in his plans that could not be filled by anyone else. More, it left him (again) a professor short for the upcoming fall semester.

Losing Snape also meant losing his personal spy within Voldemort's ranks, which, by itself, was an irreplaceable loss. He'd also lost his access to the goings-on within the Slytherin dorm, which he knew

would significantly compromise his ability to forestall problems arising from the near-constant machinations of the Slytherin students. When they weren't trying to kill Harry or his supporters, they were fighting between themselves. Severus had always been the one to help him head off any major plots that might be occurring. His absence meant he'd have to start all over again with another professor or student infiltrator and those took time and effort to cultivate. Time that he did not have any longer, because of Riddle's return.

Dumbledore found that as a personal matter, he couldn't bring himself to feel bad about Snape's death. Severus had never had been that bright, at least when it came to provoking those he shouldn't. It was one of those qualities that you just could not beat, cajole, or train out of someone. The man's bugaboo had been James Potter (because of his connection to, and love for, Lily Evans née Potter) and that animosity had transferred to Harry just the moment that he entered Snape's classroom on the very first day of Harry's first year.

What was worse was that Snape's abuse of Harry had become much more targeted, more severe and more vindictive during Harry's first three 'ultimate straw' came the day that that Snape slandered Hermione in Harry's presence, just one day after Sirius had 'escaped'. Harry could have tolerated Snape's slanders towards him. They were so expected that Harry could just let them roll off his back. The mistake that he made was gratuitously insulting Hermione, telling Harry that he only succeeded because the 'mudblood' helped him make up for his inherited genetic failings.

Severus had pointed his wand at Harry, thinking that he'd be able to curse the boy without repercussions. Hermione had, thinking fast, used a bit of wandless magic (driven by her feelings of desperation) to make the hospital doors clang open, causing Snape to momentarily turn his head and giving Harry the time to get his wand out.

By the time Snape had whipped around to confront Harry again, Harry had moved, causing Snape's anticipated curse to miss the mark while making sure that his own reply did not miss.

Severus had come off the much worse for wear from that encounter and had practically pledged the rest of his existence to getting 'even'

with Potter for what he had suffered. It became a hatred that was self-sustaining. Over the two and a half months, every time Severus took a run at Harry, Harry retaliated, but twice as vindictively. The final showdown had come during the last week of August, just a week before the students reported to Platform 9 and three-quarters.

Severus sought out Harry while he and Hermione were walking hand-in-hand in the park near Grimmauld place and challenged Harry to a duel. Since Harry was underage, he could not legally accept the challenge. Severus had known that as well, but was so consumed with anger that he issued the challenge anyway. Harry did the only sensible thing he could do, given that he could not do magic outside of school yet: He had Hermione distract the man and then, seizing the moment, he used what he had learned growing up as a Muggle - kicking Severus between the legs so hard that he doubled-over with pain. Not willing to leave his antagonist with a wand or a means of lashing out afterwards, Harry did the one thing he had learned the hard way from Dudley's 'gang' about dealing with bullies: He booted the potions-master into a bloody unconsciousness; taking his wand and snapping it when he was finished.

Harry and Hermione learned the hard way that no actions are without consequences. They were both arrested by the Aurors for what they had done. However, their memories of the incident confirmed their version of events to the satisfaction of both the School's Board and the Wizengamot's Youthful Offenders trial division. The memories, taken under the influence of veritiserum, rather than giving Severus the opportunity to see his nemesis kicked out of school, had almost cost his potions-master his job. As it was, it had taken Poppy Pomfrey five hours of spell-work and potions to undo all the damage that Harry's kicks had done to the man's face and body in the wake of the encounter and three focused obliviations after his trial to get his potions-master back to the point where he could even be civil to Harry.

"Vicious when provoked, just like his father", Dumbledore thought, as he reviewed the memory of Harry's 'encounter' with Snape. "Going to have to channel that, if Harry's going to take down Riddle."

It was a puzzle to solve; a conundrum to contemplate. It was also a huge opportunity to permanently write himself into the history books and cause statues to be erected in his honor – which he thought

was only right and proper, after everything he had done for the wizarding world.

Looking around, he saw the first stirrings of activity among the Weasleys. Since he didn't have the Elder Wand, he was forced to resort to his original one... and that was going to take some getting used to, after all the years that had gone by.

Reaching into his inner robe, he drew out the Dragon heart-string, Manticore blood and yew wand. It felt strange in his hand and he wondered if there was some chance that the wand might reject him. He casually flicked the wand and a small streamer of sparkles came out. "Good" he thought to himself.

Tapping each of the Weasleys in turn, he then enervated and unbound them, so that they could stand and get his or her bearings. Molly and Arthur looked distinctly worse off than how he had left them at noon.

When both Molly and Arthur rounded on him about what happened, he had been forced to admit that they had suffered a 'setback' and that he didn't know where Harry, Hermione, the elder Grangers, the Weasley Twins, Remus or Sirius were at the moment and that it was likely that they were together. When Ron and Ginny started complaining, loudly, about what they had been 'promised' for their help and cooperation, Arthur and Molly did the only sensible thing possible: they shut their children up with a 'Silencio' and then a strong compunction charm to sit down and remain still.

The conversation after that was much smoother and less confrontational.

After they all left, "Took them long enough!", Albus sat back in his chair once more and thought about the diminished number of alternative choices he had in terms of regaining control over Harry or even finding him. He could not use Nymphadora Tonks, as she was a Black and was therefore subject to family discipline (if Sirius chose to invoke it) and Emmeline Vance was out, as she was personally beholden to the Potter line, through her father. All Harry had to do was to call in her families outstanding obligations and Emmeline would literally have to do anything Harry asked of her.

Alastor Moody had gone back into retirement and had moved out of the country – for parts unknown, and Dedalus Diggle was completely useless. Hestia Jones, the elder sister to Gwenog Jones (of Hollyhead Harpies fame) was too busy being an Auror and trying to make it onto the Hit-wizard squad to want to have anything to do with hunting down Harry Potter. Especially since Amelia Bones had given explicit instructions, as the Minister for Magic, that Harry was to be left alone.

Kingsley Shacklebolt, the Director of the Ministry of Law Enforcement (DMLE) for all of magical Great Britain, was sympathetic, but had told Dumbledore on many occasions that he was not someone who Dumbledore could just order around and that the Order of the Phoenix was an organization not designed to fight, but rather to collect information. There were too few of them to really threaten to anyone, he told Dumbledore, and it was better for all involved if they just stayed out of the way.

Bill and Charlie Weasley's sympathies were unknown, but he suspected that the two older Weasley sons would probably align with Harry and their twin brothers, rather than Arthur and Molly.

Minerva McGonagall, his long-time lover and friend, would stand with him...but only so long as she felt that he was truly protecting Harry and not hurting him. If anyone looked at Harry as a son, it was her.

How do I get at Hermione, then? He mused. "What happens when Hermione and Harry find the tracking spells? What do I do if they bond?" The third question was more than enough to cause him to want to have a drink. A happily-bonded Harry was a Harry that he could not control, because it would forever put him outside Dumbledore's reach (because with bonded partners, killing one is killing both).

It was enough to drive a man to drink, the Headmaster mused dejectedly. Plans that had been crafted for years and carefully tended along the way had suddenly gone to pot in the space of a half-hour. He knew that without the Elder Wand, he could not face Riddle again and hope to win and without that present threat, Tom would not hesitate to try to find Harry and attack him.

So the problem boiled down to what, if any, hope he had for either controlling or manipulating Harry so that the young man would be pushed towards his destiny successfully.

The sooner he found Harry, the easier things would be. He had to find him...and soon.

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In the Great Hall of the Longbottom Estate – Falstone, England - 7:15 P.M.

The after-dinner conversation, which mostly focused on what Dumbledore had done or tried to do, had been going on for more than an hour, when Hermione finally bucked up sufficient courage to ask Padma and Parvati Patil the question that she had been dying to ask since hearing the news several hours before.

Leaning a bit closer to them, she said, "So... what's it like?"

The two beautiful girls giggled. It was the question they had been expecting, but in not quite such an inelegant turn of phrase.

Padma looked at her sister and they both grinned. Padma finally broke the tension and spoke first. "It's wonderful. Neville is SO caring and so gentle with us. We've done nothing more than kiss, really, but it was all four of us together and it was amazing. I could feel everyone's magic and it was like nothing I've ever felt before."

Parvati looked at her with a little bit of a frown and then said, a bit more quietly. "Pad's not exactly right. The only other time I've ever felt anything like it was the time that you returned to the Great Hall after being unpetrified and you ran up and hugged Harry. I could feel his magic from clear across the room. Do you know just how much he loves you?"

Padma nodded as her sister spoke and then said, "Yea, I had forgotten about that. Parv's right. I could feel Harry's magic from all the way at the other end of the table and it felt like he was right next to me."

Hermione looked at the girls and then said, in a voice that was almost too low to be heard, "He's asked me to marry him and I said yes."

The twins looked at her and then 'squee'd' their excitement. It caught everyone's attention at the table and caused Augusta to raise a solitary eyebrow at the girls, calming them down almost instantly.

It didn't, however, lessen either Padma's or Parvati's excitement at the news. "So..." they said together, "when are you going to bond with him?"

"As soon as we can find someone to do the ritual", Hermione said, blushing furiously.

It was a bombshell that she had hoped to avoid having to drop, as she and Harry had just decided the matter during their hour-long snogging session, but since the cat was out of the bag, she thought that she might as well go and do the thing properly.

Turning in her seat so that she could face her parents – who were seated kitty-corner to her across the table – she took Harry's hand in hers and said, in a voice that she knew was loud enough to be heard all around, "Everyone? Lady Longbottom? I'd like to make an announcement, if I have your leave to do so."

Augusta nodded, sensing what was coming. "Harry and I have decided, given Neville's news, to be bonded as soon as is practicable."

It was both more and less of a bombshell than she knew. Miranda looked surprised, but not shocked nor overly concerned, while Remus and Sirius sat in bemused acceptance of a situation that both had already anticipated. Neville's eyes went wide with both surprise and happiness for his best Gryffindor friends while Susan Bones pumped her fist in the air and then high-fived both Padma and Parvati. The Weasley twins, for all of their bluster and braggadocio, looked amazed and envious. Both wanted to be married, as they had grown up in an environment where they had been taught, both by their father (to a lesser degree) and their older brothers (to a greater degree), the value and joy of having a smart wife. Hermione was as smart and beautiful as any wizard could ever

hope for and she had just publicly pledged herself to one Harold 'Harry' James, the Lord Potter-Gryffindor.

"We bloody well" Fred began,

"Need to"

"Find ourselves"

"Smart wives"

"And soon", Fred finished.

Everyone at the table, save for the Weasley twins, broke up laughing at their unrehearsed, but perfectly executed short soliloquy on what their next task was going to be, if they had their druthers.

Fred and George both had the good sense to blush; joining in the laughter which permeated the table at that moment. Even Augusta saw the humor of the moment and shared in the happiness. It wasn't often that she had shared table with young people who were so centered and so understanding. More, she inwardly acknowledged that Neville simply could not have a better group of young people to call friends. It was as much as any mother could hope for her child – and she did, in so very many ways – think of Neville as her son. She was fiercely protective of him and loved him every bit as much as her own grandson would, were he still in his right mind.

Thinking about what had been done to her grandson made her seethe with anger and she decided to ask the new Lord Gryffindor what he intended to do about the blight that called itself 'lord' Voldemort.

When she did, the answer was startling. "I intend to train overseas for the next two or three years, wherever I can find the right school and tutors Lady Longbottom, and then I am going to come back and kill every one of his followers, in turn, and then kill him. I can't do it here in England because Dumbledore would have me be a martyr for the cause and claim the credit for himself and I can't abide by that."

"You are leaving England soon, Lord Gryffindor?"

Harry waived the question off. "Lady Longbottom, may I dispense with the titles for a moment? Please call me Harry. My friends all do and I'd like to think of you as a friend as well."

Augusta was startled by his request, but acquiesced without comment. "Certainly, Harry. Now, let me ask my question again. Are you leaving England soon?"

"Yes, Lady Longbottom, we all are. Jake and Miranda, Hermione's parents, would be in jeopardy if they stayed in England, because of their association with me, while Sirius, Remus, and the Twins all have their reasons for wanting to come with me. We're all much safer together, living and working as a group, than we would ever be apart. More, we're happier, I think, all knowing that we have people to turn to for help and encouragement. Leaving anyone behind is unacceptable, as far as I am concerned."

"Would you consider taking my great grandson and his wives with you?"

Harry didn't even have to think about the answer to the question. "In a half a heart-beat, Lady Longbottom. Neville is my best male friend, other than Remus and Sirius, and I want him safe, just as you do. As for his wives, they are my friends as well, and I don't think that Amelia Bones would be at all hard to convince to let Susan come with us."

Susan, who was sitting towards the end of the table and to Neville's immediate left, blushed prettily and then nodded. Susan was the last of the Bones family and stood to inherit both the title of Baroness Bones and a considerable fortune in mining rights and shipping interests. The Bones family was actually Norwegian in origin, but the family name had been corrupted from the original spelling "Bonde", meaning 'farmer' and had come out 'Bones' on one or more documents that were lost to history. The name stuck and that was that.

The Barony itself had been earned by extraordinary service to the King during, ironically, the War for American Independence...which had not gone so well for the Monarchy. Amelia had always promised Susan, who had a lot of curiosity about her family's history, that she'd eventually launch a full genealogical search, but had yet to get around to doing it.

Padma and Parvati thought about the possibility of travelling with Neville, Harry, Hermione, and the others and were both excited by the prospect. England always had been fairly stifling socially and they thought the idea of seeing other parts of the world was wonderful.

"Can we, please?" Both said to Neville; turning on their best, most attractive (and hardest to resist) smiles. Neville, like males everywhere in the world, folded like a house of cards in the face of such an onslaught.

"Resistance is futile" Harry thought, smiling at his friend.

Sirius spoke up for Harry, knowing that he and his godson were of the same mind, "It's settled then. Tomorrow, after Neville and his ladies are hand-fastened..."

"And Harry and I are bonded", Hermione interjected.

"Right... so... we'll get everyone prepped, packed, and ready to travel".

"Where will you go first?"

"Sirius and I have talked about that" Remus said. "We would like to approach the Parkinsons, but are not sure whether they can be convinced. We would also like to approach the Greengrasses, but aren't sure with them, either. Beyond that, there are the Changs – both Cho and her older sister Ann are or have been at Hogwarts – and would be assets to our efforts as well as the Lovegoods. Luna is important to Harry and Hermione and I'm pretty sure that they don't want to see her hurt if they're not at Hogwarts to protect her."

Augusta thought about what Remus had said. "I can intercede with the Parkinsons and the Greengrasses, as well as the Changs. The Lovegoods are up to you."

Padma squeezed Neville's hand. "I can contact Luna. She trusts me and will listen."

"Then it's decided. We'll prepare to leave here tomorrow afternoon. With luck, we can be out of England by dinner-time" Remus said.

Sirius looked at Neville and then at his great grandmother. "Who's doing the hand-fasting for you four?"

"My Aunt, Amelia"

"The Minister of Magic's coming here?" Harry said, his throat suddenly tight. It was one thing to try to intercede on Susan's behalf at a safe distance. It was altogether a different thing, especially in the wake of what they had so recently done to the Headmaster, to be in the Minister's actual presence.

"She's not expecting to see you here, Harry, if that's what you're worried about. If she knows what happened between you and Dumbledore, she'll not be in a position to do anything about it until you all are well and gone. However, I'm betting that Dumbledore hasn't informed anyone yet and is trying to reach out to those he feels he still controls in order to find you. He won't tell anyone what's happened unless he has to."

"Will she perform the bonding ceremony if we ask her to, Susan?" Hermione said from where she sat. She, too, was nervous about being near a sitting Minister for Magic. They always had Auror-bodyguards with them and neither she nor Harry knew how deep Dumbledore's tentacles ran in the wizarding government. If he had co-opted Aurors, then they might all be in serious trouble.

"Yes, Hermione, I think so. She's never refused to do one before and I don't see why, with both your godfather and Remus present that she wouldn't."

"We can't tell her about Sirius! You know that Susan. Until or unless we get his name cleared, he's not free to roam the streets. The Aurors are still hunting for him and there's a ward out for his capture."

Neville looked around the table and said, "Harry, Hermione, Remus. The three of you saw Peter Pettigrew, right? That's what you told me."

Harry said "yes", and then asked his friend to continue his thought. "What if the three of you took unbreakable vows to that effect? What if you gave her sworn statements, in front of the Aurors, that Petter

had been the secret-keeper for your parents, Harry, and that Sirius was innocent?"

"My word, you may find boys, still carries some weight in the Wizengamot. If you do this thing properly, I can make sure that Lord Black's name is cleared and that recompense is made for being in Azkaban without trial for the last twelve years."

Neville sat absolutely still, so complete was his shock. He had never before heard his great grandmother offer to use her considerable powers for any reason at all, except things that might directly affect the Longbottom family or its reputation. "You... you... you'd do that?" he asked Augusta tremulously.

"Yes, I would and I will, Neville. Your friends are true friends indeed. If Lord Potter here is willing to take you and your wives with him overseas and train you while he and his lady train, then I will think my end of the deal an easy burden indeed."

Hermione smiled with pride at Harry. She knew that it was Harry's implicit and instinctive generosity, as well as his loyalty to his friends, that had sealed the deal.

Leaning over to Harry, she said, in a deeper, huskier voice that only he could hear, "You are so going to get lucky tonight, mister." The effect of Hermione's words, along with her tone of voice, sent Harry's pulse racing and blood flowing south faster than a popsicle melts on a hot summer day in Georgia.

It took Harry a full minute to gather his wits about him before he was able to return the favor and whisper in her ear in Parseltongue, "I want you, too", even as he pushed every bit of his magic and his desire at her.

It caught her completely off-guard and before she knew it, she was gripping his arm and cumming hard; soaking her sensible cotton knickers with her orgasmic release.

The all of the twins – Padma, Parvati, Fred, and George – immediately knew what had just happened; leaving Neville and Susan momentarily in the dark. Padma made a small motion with her hands and suddenly Susan was 'in the loop', even if it left her blushing like a mad-woman. Neville only joined the party when

Hermione was finally able to sit up straight, still completely flushed from her roaring climax, and she swatted Harry hard on the shoulder.

Miranda knew, because she had seen herself so often in the mirror above their bed after a wild bout of sex with her husband, what she looked like after a tumultuous orgasm and she saw that look now in her only daughter. The shocking thing was that Harry's hands had been above the table the whole time, so she knew for a certainty that he had done nothing which might have been considered 'inappropriate' in Muggle circles.

When Hermione made eye contact with her mother, she couldn't help but smile that loopy smile of a girl who was both madly in love and totally, completely sexually satisfied.

Remus, who was sitting opposite to Miranda, knew immediately that Hermione had just climaxed. His wolf-senses were screaming at him that there was a highly fertile young witch in the room and he had to fight the almost overwhelming instinct to try to claim her – because doing so, his rational side knew, would only get him killed.

Even Augusta, who was twenty years beyond any ability to reproduce, knew that Hermione had just had a powerful orgasm, triggered by the magic of the wizard who sat next to her. She had felt the after-effects of the wave of sexual energy that Harry had pushed at Hermione like a hot, moisture-laden breeze. It had been like the oncoming storm-front which Muggles felt, just before a massive thunderstorm broke over them, only Harry's had been almost infinitely more powerful.

As Hermione recovered herself, everyone around her tried to keep from laughing. "Feeling better, dear?" Her mother asked suggestively, from where she sat.

"Mom!" Hermione said, in that indescribable way that every teenage girl does, when her mother does or says something highly embarrassing.

Augusta, sensing that things were about to get out of hand, suggested quickly that they adjourn for the evening and gather again at breakfast, so that any last-minute decisions could be hashed out.

There were nods all around and soon they all pushed back from the table, took time to thank the two house-elves who were waiting to clean up, and then went to their separate rooms. Neville wisely accepted Padma and Susan's suggestion that the four of them (including Parvati) make use of the hot-tub that sat on the private patio outside Neville's first-floor suite. Hermione, for her part, couldn't get out of the room fast enough. She was both embarrassed and excited by what had happened and the desire to experience the same kind of release again was overpowering. Grabbing Harry by the hand, she pulled him out of the room and up the stairs towards their room.

Miranda and Jake, Jake especially, thought that they ought to corner their daughter and soon-to-be son-in-law and started to move in a direction that would allow them to do so when they were cut off by Sirius.

"You probably ought to leave them be" he said, in a measured, even tone. "They know what they're doing."

"I don't want my daughter to get pregnant, simply because the boy in her life can make her orgasm with just a word." The trace of bitterness/jealousy in the man's voice struck Sirius as funny, causing him to laugh aloud.

"What's so funny?" Jake asked, feeling defensive.

"Nothing really, Jake. It's just that what Harry did tonight was just so much more than you can possibly imagine. He didn't just say something and cause your daughter to orgasm. He pushed his magic...and his desire for her...at her and combined it with Parseltongue – snake language. I don't know what Harry said to her and neither does she, but whatever it was, it was enough to push her over the edge. No one else could do to Hermione what Harry just did. That's what makes it special."

Jake shoved his hands into his pockets in frustration with the situation. Somehow, what Harry had done was just wrong. Or if not wrong, at least not what a 'good boy' should do to his fiancé.

"Something that you ought to know is that Harry has far more magical potential than pretty much anyone else in this house...or

maybe all of us combined, save Hermione. He can direct his magic to do things that you think are literally impossible."

Jake had known, of course, that Harry was powerful – the Goblin king had said as much - but he hadn't had it hammered home to him quite so directly.

"Jake, put it this way: Harry, in your world, is as close to a god as anyone you will ever meet. He can't raise the dead...no one can, and he can be killed just you or me...but he can also summon or banish demons, strike people down with a word, summon lightning, create storms, move mountains, and do just about anything else that you might ascribe to a deity. He can heal the sick, cause blind people to see, and do any manor of other things. When Harry gets to his full, adult strength in two years' time, he'll be close to being completely unstoppable. That's why Voldemort's so deathly afraid of him.

Now, if you're wondering, Voldemort is everything that Harry is, only with fifty extra years to learn the discipline of wielding magic. He's pure evil and he has to be killed. We're all going overseas because Harry desperately needs to 'catch up' and grow into his powers. Hermione as well."

"If it helps" Remus said, interjecting into the conversation, "We'll be there every step of the way to help guide them. Remus and I are pretty good – though we're not in Harry's league in terms of power and never will be. What we have over him now is experience and training...and we both want to pass that on to Harry and Hermione. They deserve a chance to live their lives and this is the only way that Padfoot or I can think of to make that possible."

They were all standing in the archway of the Great Hall of the Longbottom house and while it was pleasant enough, it wasn't conducive to long conversations. A hallway to the right led to another large sitting-room and so the four sort of drifted that way unconsciously.

When they were all seated, Remus said, "When I taught Harry and Hermione during their third year, I was amazed at how quickly Harry and Hermione picked up all the concepts that I was trying to teach. Harry, especially, seemed to grasp that there are a myriad of threats in the magical world...as well as a myriad number of ways to defend

against them. I was astonished when, during their mid-term exam, Harry came up with three or four additional ways of defending against attacks by magical creatures that I had never thought of before. Not only that, but he taught all of his friends, including Hermione, Neville, Ron, and others, those same solutions. If it weren't for the fact that Hermione failed one section of the final exam..."

Miranda took in a deep breath and then said, "She never told us about that! Spill!"

Remus smiled. Telling Miranda about her daughter's exam failure was payback for the time that Hermione had cursed him in such a way that when he did his monthly transformation, his fur was violently pink the entire night – which she then captured using a wizarding camera. The picture of that shame was still making its way around in the local werewolf packs, even after six months' time, to his undying consternation.

"Hermione had to banish a Boggart – what the Scots call 'Bogles' – and she couldn't do it."

Miranda looked at Remus, not understanding what was being said. "The way you're looking at me tells me that you have no idea what a Boggart is."

Miranda nodded. "Ok. Well, it's simple. A Boggart is an evil creature – a demon of sorts – that is a shape-shifter. It can read your worst, most suppressed nightmares, out of your mind in a split-second and become that thing that terrifies you most. My Boggart always takes the shape of a full moon – because I am a werewolf. I have to transform once a month into a terrible, mindless, blood-thirsty creature and that transformation is triggered by the full moon. Hence my nickname, 'Moony'.

Sirius immediately sprang to his best friends' defense, seeing the horrified look on Jake and Miranda's faces. "It's alright, really, it is. Remus takes a potion each night for the ten days leading up to the full moon and that lets him keep his sanity and helps him control the werewolf within during the transformation. We also keep him confined for a six-hour period, just to make sure."

Jake and Miranda visibly deflated upon hearing that news and seemed greatly relieved.

"I understand, really I do" Remus said. "It's a very scary thing. Harry and Hermione have seen my form once – the night that they rescued Sirius. That was a close call, because I hadn't had my potion yet that night and I wasn't safe. That was the night that we discovered that Peter Pettigrew was still alive."

"Anyway – back to the story. The trick to banishing a Boggart is to laugh at it. You project a mental image at it of the thing that you find funniest and it's forced to transform... to become that thing. When you combine it with the simple charm that is used to banish them, they are easy to handle. However, if you lose your control or your mental discipline – if you give into the fear that they are trying to create - you can be overwhelmed by the Boggart. That's when bad things can happen. Hermione was overcome by her Boggart – which for her, at the time, took the shape of Minerva McGonagall. Minerva, as you may remember, is the Deputy Headmistress of the School. The Boggart-McGonagall said to her that she had failed all of her classes and that she was a terrible student. Hermione broke down in tears and couldn't continue. I had to intervene to protect her from the Boggart. That's why she failed that section."

Instead of laughing, Jake and Miranda looked thoughtful and said nothing for almost a minute. "What about Harry's?"

Remus cringed a little bit at the question. "That's... personal."

Sirius laid a hand on his friends' shoulder and said, "It's alright, Moony. Harry wouldn't mind."

Remus Lupin thought about that for a moment and then said, "Well, Harry's Boggart becomes a Dementor – a wraith of sorts – that can literally suck out your soul. They are the foulest creatures on Earth and are feared by everyone. They feed on negative emotions of every kind. They make you remember your very, very worst memory or experience. What makes seeing a Dementor bad for Harry is that his experiences are just that much more awful than any other student."

Remus put both hands up and rubbed his eyes. He was more tired than he had originally thought and the pressure of the day was

finally getting to him. He knew he'd have to call it a day soon and get to bed. "Anyway, Harry learned how to handle the Boggart-dementors. He'd summon his Patronus. That's how, in fact, I taught him the charm. I didn't dare suggest to anyone that Harry and I go out to the gates of Hogwarts and look for a real Dementor to practice against."

Jake said, interrupting, "What's a Patronus?"

"A Patronus is a visual representation of positive energy. A witch or wizard can conjure his or her Patronus by focusing on his or her very best, most positive memory. The energy created by such a thought is then channeled into the magic. A Patronus is a shield of sorts that protects the caster against the effects of the Dementor. Usually a witch or wizard can hold off two or three Dementors. Harry, on the other hand, drove off or destroyed over one hundred Dementors."

There was a look of awe on the Grangers' faces. Remus continued. "Each Dementor that you add, beyond two or three, adds about a magnitude of difficulty to the charm. That's what makes Harry's accomplishment something for the history books. He may be the most powerful wizard in a thousand years... and that is really saying something."

Jake looked at Remus and said, "So, going upstairs and trying to keep Harry and Hermione from doing whatever it is that they're wanting to do is futile?"

Remus nodded sympathetically even as Sirius laughed out loud. Miranda wanted to swat her husband for his persistence on the matter, but resisted the temptation for the moment.

"Jake, just suppose you could somehow get past whatever barriers Hermione and Harry have erected to guard their privacy – which I'm not even sure Dumbledore himself could get past. Now, having done that bit of very formidable magic, suppose that you found them en flagrante on their bed. Now think about how angry Harry would be that you interrupted them. Consider whether Harry would let you live long enough to say anything at all."

Miranda put a soothing hand on her husbands'. "The heart wants what it wants, Jake. We weren't that much older than Harry and Hermione when we got together."

"But...."

"But nothing, Jake." Sirius' tone had turned firmer. "You've got to let this one go. Harry's magic is so powerful that even if she wanted to, Hermione could not, probably, resist it. Witches are driven to seek out the most powerful compatible wizard who is available. That's the witch's secret and for Hermione, it's Harry. I'm actually surprised that Neville's the one with the harem and not Harry. He's got the money and the magic to sustain multiple relationships and god knows, he's got the fame."

"Fine. Alright already. Just don't ask me to like it."

Miranda brought both of her hands to his face and made him focus on her, exclusively. "We're not, love. All we're saying is that you've got to accept it and move on. Being protective of Hermione is one thing. It's another altogether to be so stubborn as to not see that Harry is far more protective of her than you are. And he's the one who has all the capabilities. How would you like it if, in a fit of frustration with your attitude, he turned you into a slug? He could you know, and you'd be lucky if he didn't pour salt all over you, just to further 'express' his frustration. Don't be like my dad was with us, ok? He loves Hermione and he's going to marry her tomorrow. Be grateful for that."

Jake's expression softened considerably, even as he felt his wife's silky-soft hands caressing his face. "Alright, love. I understand. I'll do what you say....just...give me a little time to get used to it. A lot has happened today."

Jake, Miranda, Remus, and Sirius whiled away several more hours talking about things magical and things Muggle and shared plans and hopes for the future. They were oblivious to what was happening elsewhere.

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Riddle Manor – Little Hangleton – earlier that same evening

There was nothing more costly to a death-eater than ignoring his or her master's call. Those who ignored it usually paid the ultimate price and death-eaters were nothing if not ambitious and self-serving.

Thomas 'Tom' Marvolo Riddle, Jr. a/k/a 'Lord Voldemort' was angry. He was angry because of his servants had not returned, even after being summoned twice. Patience was not one of Riddle's greater virtues, though he might have claimed otherwise, given the eleven and a half years that he endured as nothing more than a wraith.

From where he sat, on throne-style chair in the middle of the Great Room of the main house on the Riddle estate, Lord Voldemort scanned his followers' minds. Of those who were present; Peter Pettigrew, Lucius Malfoy, John Dawlish, Steven Yaxley, Antonin Dolohov, Barcus Rosier, and Alexandre Crabbe, none really had the wherewithal to do what he needed done – which was to go to Hogwarts and find out where Severus Snape was.

It made him mad and that was never, ever a good thing. "Dawlish!"

"Yes, my lord?" Dawlish said, moving forward and falling to his knees in front of his re-born lord.

"I need you to go to Hogwarts and find out what has become of Severus. He is not answering my summons and this displeases me greatly."

Voldemort's eyes were red and shown with evil malice. "Go now, Dawlish, and when you find Severus, bring him here. I would know the reason that our potions-master is ignoring his true master's call."

Dawlish was anxious to do his masters' bidding. He had never seen such power as his master showed and he knew that if he served his master well, he would rise in the ranks and be honored as few had ever been.

Dawlish bowed again and then withdrew, making sure that his eyes didn't meet his master's.

Once Dawlish was gone, Voldemort turned to the others who were left. "Well, my faithful, tell me of Harry Potter."

"My lord?" Peter said, hesitantly, but hopefully.

"What is it, Peter? Have you something to offer your Lord?"

Peter quavered in his boots, even as he went forward and bowed the same way that Dawlish had done. "My lord, none of the others here have first-hand knowledge of Potter. Only I have ever seen him up close for any long period of time."

"Peter, Peter... you know that you're an obsequious, self-serving Rat, right?"

"Yes, my Lord. Please forgive me!" he said, tucking his face between his hands and cowering at his Lords' feet.

"I will forgive you, Peter, if you give me something I can use. Otherwise, we shall have issues." Riddle pointed his wand-tip at the cringing man's left ear; close enough so that Peter would know from whence the pain came, if it came.

"Potter was friends with the Weasleys, last I knew. I was Ron's pet rat for all the time that the boy was at Hogwarts. Potter was also close friends with a young girl, a mudblood, named Hermione Granger. She was the best student at Hogwarts, it was said. There was another girl, Cho Chang, whom Potter seemed to favor, but I never saw them together. I know that the youngest Weasley, Ginevra, talked about Potter all the time and seemed to think that she'd one day marry him."

Riddle sat back in his chair and thought about what his servant had said. It was actually very useful information, if handled correctly.

"Good, Peter. You have saved yourself from pain this day. I am pleased. Have you other information that would be useful?"

"James' friend Remus Lupin taught DADA last year and was seeing being friendly with Potter. I heard that Potter can produce a fully corporeal Patronus and drove off more than one hundred Dementors protecting his godfather, Sirius Black."

"Black still lives?"

"Yes, my lord. I believe that Potter has left his Muggle relatives' home and is now living with Black during the holidays."

"Where?"

"I do not know, my Lord. I believe the property is protected by a Fidelius charm. If Black is the secret-keeper, then it is impossible to discover where that might be, unless we can find him."

Riddle knew, all too well, how powerful the Fidelius charm was and how difficult it was to circumvent. If it hadn't been for Peter, he might not ever have found Potter and killed his parents. It went without saying that if he hadn't found them that night, he might not have been reduced to a wraith, either, and that such were the penalties for underestimating old magics.

"You have served me very well tonight, Peter. You have given me much to think about and for that, I am grateful. You will be suitably rewarded at the right time."

Peter Pettigrew was ecstatic. Hearing that he had pleased his Lord was music to his ears and gave him a sense that his life might not be so worthless after all. It had been worth the risk to speak up and tell his Lord all he knew.

"I have a job for you, Peter. It is an important job and only you can do it. Are you ready?"

"Yes, my Lord! To serve you, I am always ready!"

"Your enthusiasm serves you well, Peter. Perhaps I've underestimated you all these years. Do this task well and I will be very pleased indeed. Enough to give you a favor of your choosing."

Peter felt almost overcome with joy. Tears began to fall down his cheeks. "Thank you, my Lord!"

"Go then, to the Weasleys, and discover what you can. When you have gathered all the information that you can, I want you to kill whomever is in the house. It will be a signal to those who would oppose me that my reach is long and my will, irresistible."

Peter was crestfallen. Spying he was alright with. Killing those who had taken care of him...that was a separate matter all together.

However, he had been given a chance to shine in his master's eyes and he would not disappoint. "Yes, my Lord! When shall I leave?"

"Prepare all that you need tonight. Take what stores that you will need for travelling. I will give you a supply of Galleons so that you can buy yourself a new suit. What you're wearing disgusts me and tells me you have no pride. We must fix that, if you are going to be truly one of my inner circle."

Not even Tom Riddle was above playing on his servants' base needs and wants and using their personal pride as a motivator. Sometimes it served better than fear.

"I will, my Lord! And I will not fail you!"

"Good, Peter, good. Go and be my hand reaching out."

Peter bowed once more and then stood and withdrew, never meeting his Lords' gaze.

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Peter's departure from the circle left Voldemort staring at those who were destined, he believed, with the notable exception of Lucius Malfoy, to be his executioners; his hatchet-men. They weren't all that bright and they would require a great deal more direct supervision than those, like Peter, who were internally motivated and clever enough to get a job done properly.

"Lucius, my slippery friend, tell me about what his happening at the Ministry? I cannot achieve our larger goals without knowing who will oppose us and who will not."

Lucius smiled his self-serving smile and then began his recitation on what had transpired at the Ministry since the days before his Lords' return.

Back and forth, Voldemort and Lucius talked for more than two hours. When Voldemort felt that he had heard enough, he dismissed all those present and retired to his private chamber. There was much that he had missed over the years and there were many things that had changed. Some promised to make his goal of conquest much more difficult while others simplified it somewhat. It

was hard to say, without further analysis, which obstacles were going to be the most difficult to overcome. There was one, however, that stuck out like a sore thumb and it was not Potter. It was, in fact, the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Albus Dumbledore. Before he could make any serious advances, he had to kill the 'leader of the light'. Doing so would demoralize all those who opposed him and drive into chaos any organized resistance to his rule.

The 'to-do' list had suddenly become much, much shorter. Kill the Weasleys, Dumbledore, Potter, and Amelia Bones. Disband Wizengamot. Take over.

Tom Riddle smiled for the first time in almost twelve years.

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The Burrow – Ottery St. Catchpole – Just after dusk – the same day

Molly Weasley was banging around her kitchen, taking out her frustrations on her pots and pans as she cleaned up from another miserable and lonely dinner-for-one. Things had gone very, very wrong for her this day, just as they had for Albus Dumbledore. The monies that her daughter would have had access to through the Potter Estate would have restored her family to something approaching respectability within the pureblood community and now she and Ginny had no chance at them, barring a miracle. Not that she'd ever, ever tell anyone that she felt that way, but it was obvious enough, both to Ginny and to Ron and perhaps, to a lesser extent, to Arthur. He was not of the same mind on things, especially as they related to Harry Potter, but was not aggressive enough in his relationship with Molly to be willing to do anything to jeopardize his marriage. In other words, he was completely and totally whipped.

The Twins....now there was a source of disappointment if she had ever encountered one. Even as she smashed together several pans as she put them away in the cabinet to the left of the oven, Molly Weasley thought about how both Fred and George had sided with Harry and Hermione against their own family. "How could they do that to me! To us!" she fumed. "Misbegotten little brats. Never did what they were told. Never cleaned their room. Made the family look inept and incompetent. Three O.W.L's each! What a disgrace!"

Back and forth her thoughts warred and raged, even she finished cleaning the kitchen. Finally, she sat down and then, after grabbing a high-ball glass, turned to her source of comfort; of blessed, blessed relief. Ogden's Thrice-aged Firewhiskey.

She could smell the charcoal of the barrels in which the Firewhiskey had reposed for so long, even before taking the first sip. It burned, like it always did. She relished the feeling as the Firewhiskey hit the back of her throat and she felt the all-too-familiar sting on her tongue. It wasn't sweet, really, but it left a pleasant numbness that she had grown to love.

The only feeling that was comparable, in Molly's mind, was that of the Muggle liquor, Cachaca, which was made from distilled sugar-cane juice. It had the same punch; the same fire going down. The only difference was that she could drink Cachaca all night and never get drunk whereas it didn't take more than three glasses of Ogden's to do away with all her cares and pains. She loved Ogden's.

Soon, very soon, Molly Weasley was passed out in the recliner, as she was on so many nights, an empty glass in one hand and the half-empty bottle of Ogden's in the other. Arthur was at work, as usual, and her youngest son and daughter were visiting with her step-sister's children for the evening. No one would see her, no one would know that Molly Weasley, matriarch of the Weasley clan, was becoming just like her own mother had been: angry, anxious, unhappy, and embittered.

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Longbottom Estate – Falstone, England - Guest-quarters, 2nd floor.
– Just before 10 P.M. There was no way that Hermione Potter, which is how she thought of herself now, was going to be able to explain to her mother what being with Harry James Potter meant to her. Not because there weren't the words for it, but because there was no more private person that Harry and she would never to anything to betray that privacy. The only four people (well, three perhaps) who'd ever even have a glimpse of what being with Harry was like were the three girls who were about to hand-fast themselves with Neville Longbottom. They'd never tell, she was sure, and they would be able to share with her, in return, what being in a foursome was like. Hermione was savoring the luxurious feeling of being naked and face-down in one of the most magnificent beds she had ever found, with Harry's hands massaging her all over. It had

taken almost no time at all to become totally comfortable with being naked around him and it had started, of course, innocently enough ("Hah! Innocent my foot" her mother would have said). She had fallen on top of him just as soon as they had returned to their bedroom after dinner and they had begun kissing; slowly at first and then with increasing passion. Harry had, at first, resisted doing the very thing which Hermione wanted most – which was to touch her all over. In particular, she wanted his wonderful hands on her bottom. It had taken some coaxing, but finally he had done what she wanted and began to kneed and caress her bottom. As he did so, she ground her sex into him, pushing it against the erection that was straining to get out of his pants. Finally, she couldn't take it any more and she growled in his ear, "Take my pants off". Unable to unzip them, because of the way she was lying on top of him, Harry simply banished her pants over to one corner of the room; leaving his soon-to-be wife in her cotton camisole and knickers. She shivered immediately and Harry could feel the goose-bumps all over her skin as the cool air in the room struck her. "Hey! I thought you were going to go slow! Now it's your turn" Hermione said in his ear. "Thought you'd never ask, love!" he said, even as he wandlessly banished his clothes to the same pile – all of his clothes. Hermione squeaked as she felt his omnipresent, very insistent erection suddenly press against the soft but damp silky cotton gusset of her knickers. She started to move, so that she wasn't putting undue pressure on him or hurting him in any way, but was constrained by the hands on her bum that suddenly held her firmly in place. "Oh God, Hermione. I never knew..." "What, love?" she whispered in a suggestive tone. "Your knickers... so soft... so sexy." Hermione giggled. Her knickers had always been strictly functional – in other words, white, cotton, Granny! knickers, per her mothers' edict, but she knew, after four years of rooming with Lavender Brown and Parvati Patil, that there were lots and lots of styles that he was going to like and she couldn't wait to see his reaction when she tried on new ones for him. "You're in for a treat then, lover-boy. Just wait until tomorrow!" "You're going to kill me, 'Mione" Harry groaned into her ear as she rocked her hips up and down, rubbing her cotton-covered sex against his erection. "Just you wait, Harry. Any man who can make me cum with just a word, like you did, deserves a reward". "I love you, Hermione. I didn't know if it was going to work." he said, squeezing her bum and kissing the small, soft spot just in front of her ear at roughly the same moment. She groaned his name and buried her face in the nape of his neck; savoring every moment of his touch. "Oh God, Harry. It worked! It worked!" "Good" he said, rolling her over, so that

he was lying on top of her; holding himself up, so that he was looking down at her. That she was beautiful was a given. To Harry's eyes, she was the most beautiful girl whom he had ever seen. Her eyes – a deep, chocolate brown; her lips – the softest, prettiest pink; her hair – soft, golden-brown ringlets that framed her face; and her face – perfect in every detail, from the freckles that dotted her complexion to the nose that was exactly, and perfectly, proportioned for her. "I love you, Hermione" "I know, Harry. I've always known. And I've loved you ever since first year." Harry smiled down at her. He knew the moment that she was referring to, even if she didn't speak it out loud. It was the moment, just before he went to confront Quirrell, when she said, "Me! Books! And cleverness! There are more important things – friendship and bravery and – oh Harry – be careful!" Harry knew that what she hadn't said was "...and love". It was so incredibly, even painfully obvious after four years that she did, truly love him, because it was expressed in all that she did for him and in her every loving, affectionate touch. Leaning down, Harry kissed his bride-to-be; losing himself in the passion that he was feeling for her and the tremendous joy.... joy enough to overcome the years of abuse and neglect that he had suffered... that he felt as he finally and completely let his magic loose. It is said that even a Muggle can, at certain moments, feel that someone else is having a 'good day' or a 'bad day' and that it is just simply evident from the 'energies' that he or she is giving off. Harry was having a very, very good day... and everyone in the house became aware of it more or less at the same moment, as the tremendous wave of love and joy swept over him or her. Even Hermione's parents suddenly felt a great deal happier and more satisfied with each other and with the situation in which they found themselves. All of the House-elves present in and around the property knew immediately that the boy-who-lived had just become the-boy-who-fell-in-love in addition to (in Harry's opinion) all of the foolish and unnecessary titles with which British wizarding society had so cavalierly supplied him. Remus and Sirius, each in his own room, felt the powerful, magical wave wash over and through each of them and each smiled as he recognized what had just happened; even if they smiled for completely separate reasons.

"Way to go, pup", Sirius thought to himself, as he contemplated what the morning would bring; considering himself extremely lucky to have a godson like Harry. Remus smiled and then thought about James and Lily and the fact that Harry would, after the bonding ceremony, be considered an adult and therefore no longer in need

of a magical guardian. It was a sad thought though, as Remus had really liked being Harry's... even if it had been only for a short while. He wondered what role he'd end up playing in Harry's life, once Harry became a married, Head of House for the Ancient and Noble House of Potter and the Head of House Gryffindor. It could prove to be a very, very interesting morning indeed.

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Longbottom Estate – Falstone, England – June 19, 1995 – 4:45 AM.

Turning over, Remus Lupin looked at the sliver of sunlight that was filtering through the roughly drawn curtains of the bedroom where he had crashed the previous night. Somehow, his primary school learning caught up with him, even as his mind tried to decide whether it was best to rise to the morning's call or retreat to retreat again into slumbers' pleasant darkness. "Lo! in the orient when the gracious light Lifts up his burning head". It was all he could remember of Shakespeare's seventh sonnet before his body failed to rally to his minds' call and both found sanctuary in the still, mostly dark bedroom of the Longbottom Estate's east wing.

Down the hall from where Remus Lupin lay sleeping, Sirius Black was tossing and turning in his own bed; his mind disturbed by the calamitous events of the previous day and by the need that Harry had to gather those who would willingly follow him and get them out of the country safely...and quickly. There was no way that Albus Dumbledore could be allowed to manipulate those Harry cared about in such a way as to force him back into the country until he was good and ready to return. A great deal depended on, as one of the American (Muggle) presidents put it, a "coalition of the willing". The "willing" being those who saw that Harry was right and that Voldemort had indeed returned to a body and that the time was now to start getting ready to oppose him.

Deeper down, Sirius also knew that for better or worse, the Order of the Phoenix was broken, perhaps forever. Without Harry as a rallying point, the members of the Order didn't have much reason to work together. Without Snape, the groups' dynamic would certainly be different if it did stay together, but with Albus so clearly siding with the 'pureblood' agenda, there was no way that it could happen.

Fitful dreams came and went in the man's mind; replaced only occasionally now by the feelings of deepest fear and loathing that he would always carry with him as the result of being exposed to the Dementors for so long.

At the end of the hall, in the master-suite, Harry and Hermione Potter lay naked and intertwined. The soft, cotton, "sensible" knickers that Hermione had counted on to protect her virtue had disappeared during the night and their intense exploration of each others' bodies. So it was no small irony that while her virtue remained intact, her knickers didn't.

Their dreams were as intertwined as their bodies and, if they had been awake to experience it, would have surprised them not at all.

Neville could have told them that he and Harry's suite-mates (minus Ron) had lost count of the number of times that Harry and Hermione had fallen asleep together on the long, leather sofa in the Gryffindor common-room over the years. In response, Harry and Hermione might have, in a moment of honest reflection, told them that they had always done that purposefully and that they knew exactly how many times it had happened.

What Neville didn't know was that it was Parvati Patil who always made sure that Harry and Hermione were comfortable and covered by at least one blanket when the two slept on the sofa and that she had done so not so much out of consideration for Hermione, though she liked Hermione well enough, but out of a deep and abiding respect and affection for Harry and all that he had gone through at Hogwarts. It was not something that Parvati talked about with anyone, except to her twin sister, Padma.

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6:52 AM

Hermione Potter woke to her bond-mates' steady, rhythmic breathing. Looking around the room, that was lit by the diffuse sunlight that was making its way through the heavy crewel-fabric curtains; she could see the grandfather clock which stood silently in the corner of the room. When she realized that it was just a few minutes before 7 AM, she did what she could to rouse Harry.

It took five minutes to wake him – during which time she had had to resort to a combination of deft, subtle hands and intense, erotic desires whispered in his ear. At just a minute before seven, Harry opened his eyes, smiling at the beautiful young woman who was, in a matter of hours, going to be his publicly declared bond-mate and wife. He wondered, sadly, if that was going to put her in any greater danger than she already was. Thinking that it probably wasn't possible, Harry moved his thoughts along to much happier things – such as snogging his lover/friend/companion - before they joined everyone for breakfast.

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8:15 AM – at the top of the eastern-most hill overlooking the Longbottom estate – 500 meters above sea-level

Augusta Longbottom was, and always had been, charitably described as fastidious. Muggles would have described her as borderline OCD with serious control issues. Hermione Potter, if asked, might have said very diplomatically that the Lady Longbottom was meticulous. All Neville knew was that she never, ever let details about anything having to do with the household, its guests, or its standing get away from her. Her mind was as sharp as a tack and

as quick to recall subtle, nuanced details about important things as someone less than a third her age. It was by dint of that extraordinary ability that she accomplished so much in such a short amount of time.

This particular morning, Augusta Marie Longbottom née Prewett was personally creating the prayer/devotional circle while her soon-to-be daughters-in-law were being outfitted with the dresses that they would wear for the handfasting. Miranda Granger, along with several devoted and happy house-elves, were seeing to Hermione's dress.

Walking in a slow, clockwise circle, Augusta surveyed her design. At the center of the 9' prayer circle, fashioned out of stones of various colors, was an intricately fashioned Coptic cross that represented both ultimate love and personal sacrifice and at the same time, harkened back to the earliest origins of magic in Egypt. To the east, west, north, and south, in the outer circle, she personally magicked, out of colored quartz and other crystals, the insignias of houses Patil, Bones, Longbottom, and Gryffindor. When she was finished, she stood back to admire her handiwork. It had been more than twenty years since she had practiced making art with magic, but she loved doing it and was greatly relieved that her skills as an enchantress were still up to par. It had been, in decades past, her livelihood, and she was vain enough, thought she'd never mention it to Neville, to want the work that she did this day to be remembered for ages to come.

The plan was that Neville and the girls would arrive at the same time and would be greeted by Harry and Hermione, who had agreed to stand for them as best man and maid of honor. Amelia Bones would arrive by portkey just a few minutes afterwards and would be welcomed with a bouquet of local flowers by Remus Lupin and Jake Granger and then escorted to the top of the drumlin, where she would, in turn, ask that she be allowed to officiate.

In turn, she would be ritually sanctified with rose oil by the leader of the Druid council, who would be on-hand to bless the handfastings as well as Harry and Hermione's bonding.

The sanctification ritual was so old that no one remembered its origins, but it was a short and quite beautiful thing to watch. The man or woman would kneel in front of the presiding Druid and would

have a rose touched to his/her forehead, the hollow of his/her throat, and to the insides of both wrists.

The Druid would then bid the sanctified person to rise and turn to face the sun. Once he/she did so, the Druid would utter a short prayer to the sun, to Mother Earth, and to the creator that the actions that were to occur that day would be blessed and that the promises undertaken by the parties to be bonded would be filled in fullest measure.

Augusta had seen the ritual more than a dozen times in her life and it moved her each time. The first time had been when she had been bonded to her husband, Abraham, so many years before. There was something very special about the purity of the act that struck her deeply. She smiled wistfully and sadly as she thought about seeing it again, perhaps for the last time, as her great-grandson was hand-fastened with his three beautiful ladies and she thought, too, about the husband who had been taken from her seventeen years ago. Pausing, she wiped away the tears that had gathered in her eyes; glad that Neville wasn't present to see her sadness. He didn't deserve to have anything spoil his special day.

After a moment, she walked the circle one more time before deciding that she was well satisfied with what she had done. The stones that formed the prayer circle would never again be moved by man, though they might be moved by nature itself. It was the way of all things and she accepted it.

Apparating away, Augusta left a single yellow rose lying on its side, right in the heart of the cross, as a symbol of the devotion and love that she felt for what it represented.

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Just after Nine AM, at the gates of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

John Dawlish tapped the front gates of the school with his wand, and prepared to meet whomever the Headmaster sent out to greet him. His Auror badge was plainly visible on his black, full-length work robe and his hair was combed back in the traditional, albeit short, 'pureblood' ponytail. He liked to think of it as a 'warrior' braid,

but others in and around the Ministry for Magic sniggered into their sleeves when he called it such.

Dawlish was a brutish, short-ish, Welshman in his early forties who was generally angry at the world because of the large number of times that he had been passed over for promotion within the Auror ranks. His father, James Dawlish, had been an Auror of some repute....until he had been caught trying to recruit fighters for Voldemort. That had cost the man his life and forever embittered his youngest son towards the 'light-side'.

As he stood at the gates and waited, he looked around and tried to assess the best way to attack the Castle, if his master felt that it were necessary to do so. It was a daunting challenge, given the long, winding road that led up to the Castle proper and the sheer, harrowing cliffs that flanked each side. Defenders could easily pick off attackers coming up the road and attacks from the sky would be just as difficult. Looking around, he realized that all in all, it was not something he would relish having to do.

Five minutes after he arrived at the steel gates, Albus Dumbledore himself appeared to welcome him to the Castle. He was an imposing man and Dawlish looked at him with the same kind of deference that he showed his true master, though he hated doing so.

Putting on a brave face Dawlish stepped through the opening gates, extended his hand, and tried to smile a sincere smile. "Headmaster! Thank you for coming to greet me yourself. I didn't expect that."

Dumbledore smiled, wanly. "Auror Dawlish. What brings you to Hogwarts?"

As the two fell into step, up the winding road, the somewhat repugnant Auror said, as gently as possible, "Well, Headmaster, we've had a report that Severus Snape has gone missing, so I was dispatched by the DMLE to come here and find out what I could."

Dumbledore winced inside. The only person who could have known that Severus Snape was missing was Voldemort himself, because it hadn't yet been reported to anyone else, including anyone at the Ministry. He couldn't come out and admit that he knew that though. At least until he got the man inside and in a place where he could control him more easily.

As they walked together, John Dawlish let his eyes roam up and down the Castle's high towers and around one particular parapet. It was the one where the Norwegian Ridgeback dragon had almost killed Harry Potter during the Tri-Wizard Tournament, but instead had met its own death at the boys' hands. Shaking his head, he wondered just how in Merlin's name a boy of fourteen had out-flown such a beast and lived to tell about it. Had he not seen it with his own eyes, he would have told someone repeating the tale that it was preposterous that a young man could do such a thing. However, he had seen it and therefore knew that whatever other claims were made about his Master's foe, the one that said that they boy had true courage was spot-on.

Once inside, the Headmaster indicated that they should take the right-hand side staircase up to his office, which they did. A wave of his hand and the stone gargoyles sprang apart, revealing the circular staircase that let up to the Headmaster's outer office.

Dawlish had been in the office once before, during the whole episode with Sirius Black, and therefore remembered the odd staircase. He didn't, however, remember the large number of strange objects which lined the shelves all the way around the room. Some of them, like the sorting hat, he remembered from his own school days, while others – like the empty display case above the Headmaster's desk, seemed to be new.

The Auror-Corporal (which was as high as he was ever going to get in the service) tried to take in the entirety of the room and all of the objects, magical or otherwise, before he asked his first question. Unfortunately, as he turned his back to the Headmaster, he didn't see the wand come into the Headmaster's hand.

The next moment, Auror-Corporal John Dawlish was on the floor, completely and totally stunned, until the Headmaster chose to revive him.

Shaking his head, Albus Dumbledore looked down at the man in disgust. Death-eaters were as anathema to him as was a certain raven-haired young man who didn't fall in line with his plans. Just to be sure of what he suspected, the old man reached down and pulled the stunned Auror's left sleeve back all the way to the elbow.

The dark mark was plainly visible on the man's forearm.

"Oh well" the old man thought to himself. Fetching some Veritiserum from a particularly well-locked cabinet, the Headmaster turned back to his prisoner. After binding the man with strong cables and setting him upright, Dumbledore fed him three drops of the powerful potion before enervating him.

When John Dawlish came to, he quickly realized three things: (1) He had been discovered; (2) his wand was missing, and (3) he was willing to tell anyone anything they might want to know. It was sort of a giddy, heady experience, not unlike being intoxicated was for Muggles.

The questions began immediately, just as they had to, given the short time that the potion worked on most wizards.

"What is your name?"

"John Robert Dawlish" he answered, without thinking.

"Who do you work for?"

"The Dark Lord" he said automatically, as if it was obvious.

"Why were you sent here?"

"Because the Dark Lord's servant wasn't answering his call and the Dark Lord commanded me to come and discover what had become of him."

It was just as Dumbledore had suspected and he felt good that his guess was right.

"What were you supposed to do when you discovered Voldemort's servant's whereabouts?"

"I was to stun him if necessary and bring him back to the Dark Lord's presence."

"What else did Voldemort tell you?"

The questions went on for another twenty minutes, before the potion wore off. It couldn't be re-administered immediately, for fear of poisoning the person being questioned. When the Headmaster was finished, he was satisfied that he had obtained all of the relevant information that he was likely to obtain.

Stunning the Auror again, Dumbledore walked over to his private fireplace and made a fire-call to the MLE. It was long past time, he felt, that another death-eater receive a Dementor's loving 'kiss'.

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9:45 AM – Master-suite, guest wing, Longbottom estate

Whack! "Ow! That hurt!"

"Well, stop fidgeting then! Gracious, Hermione, for someone who's about to get married, you really are a squirmy worm."

Miranda Granger looked at her daughter and couldn't help but admire her daughter's amazing, athletic figure. Standing in front of the full-length mirror, Hermione looked as radiant as any girl alive and certainly more so than the late Princess Diana, though they both mourned her passing and remembered her with great affection.

Pirouetting slowly, Hermione looked at the dress that her mother had pinned up. It was made of a beautiful, snow-white silk, with a solitary golden yellow ribbon that hugged her body at the point where the skirt and top met, just above her hip-bone. It was fitted so that it was strapless...but the design necessitated the use of some minor magic to hold the dress up, because of her well (though not overly) endowed chest. Her heels were 2", which was just enough to allow Hermione and Harry to see eye to eye.

"Dulcette!" Hermione called out.

Pop! A tiny, but well-dressed female elf appeared to Hermione's right. "Yes, Lady Gryffindor?"

Hermione was caught off guard as she took in the fact that the elf in front of her was wearing the prettiest summer-weight, rose-pink cotton dress that she had ever seen. "Oh! Wow! I love your outfit. That's really pretty, Dulcette!"

The tiny elf blushed, as only elves can, right up to the tips of her ears. "Thank you, Lady Gryffindor! Mistress gave us these outfits and she let me pick the colors. We love Mistress."

Miranda watched the interaction, unsure of whether it was her place or not to ask the elf to do anything. Being a Muggle, she didn't know any of the etiquette for dealing with magical creatures and it frustrated her. Finally, she asked Hermione "Am I allowed to ask Dulcette for something?"

Hermione looked at her and then laughed. "Yes, mother, you are. Remember that house-elves like Dulcette here are smart, hard-working, and devoted. If you treat them like you treat me, they will do the same for you. The only thing is....and what you have to remember...is that they 'belong' to this household. Dulcette or the other house elf here is obligated by her magic to protect and defend the household. Therefore neither she nor any of the others can do anything that is asked of them that might harm either the household or its members."

"She's a slave?"

Hermione shook her head. "NO. I thought that once, too, but I found out that house-elves have a particular kind of magic that is symbiotic. Their own lives are enhanced and made longer and better by bonding with a human family. In other words...they need us just as much as we need them. Harry's elf, for instance, will live at least twice as long because he's bonded to Harry."

Miranda thought about that for several long seconds. "How long does a house-elf usually live?"

"About sixty or so years. But, because of the bond, Harry's elf will live at least twice that. I know that the Headmaster's elf lived for more than one hundred forty years before she died."

Wow! Miranda thought. That's a long time.

Looking down at her watch, Miranda gasped. They had only about 15 minutes left before they had to BE at the prayer circle. "Dulcette? Would you be kind enough to finish the hemming for me? I've done what I could, but we're running out of time."

Dulcette bounced up and down; happy that she could help in such an important task. "No problem, Lady Granger! I'm happy to help."

With a snap of her fingers, the hemming that Miranda had done with the pins was magically stitched. The rows of thread were perfect, tight, orderly rows that bound the fabric in such a way that the seams became invisible and the fabric flowed as if one piece.

It made Hermione look the princess that Harry felt that she was for him.

With her jewels in place and her hair done to Dulcette's and Miranda's satisfaction, the three of them disappeared into thin air; destined for the prayer circle on the high hill overlooking the Longbottom estate and the bonding ceremony that would forever cement her relationship with the young man whom she loved so much.

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10:15 AM

And so it was that Harry Potter, his intended bride Hermione Granger, Miranda and Jake Granger, and Neville and Augusta Longbottom waited for the arrival of his brides-to-be. Remus Lupin and Sirius Black stood at the apparition-point, with garlands of flowers for each of the girls and prepared to escort them the last hundred feet up the side of the hill.

The moment they appeared, the two men adorned them with the fresh, fragrant flowers and, taking them in arm, happily escorted them to their waiting husband. There was no music, except the happy sounds of birds calling in the background, as the girls drew near, but they were smiling as if processing to a grand and wonderful tune played by the largest of pipe organs.

Stepping into the prayer circle, hand in hand, Neville Longbottom, Susan Bones, and Padma and Parvati Patil prepared for the arrival of the Arch-Druid of England and the Minister herself, Amelia Bones.

The Arch-Druid appeared first – in his own, unique way. Instead of apparating or using a portkey, he literally formed himself up and out of the green growth that surrounded the prayer circle. It was as if the

plants were sending him forth as some kind of overgrown flower or something. Hermione thought privately that it was a really awesome and completely dignified way to travel, while Harry suspected that it was the only truly untraceable way of travel that he had ever seen. He wore a flowing white robe and plain, leather sandals. His beard was short and trimmed, much like the style of beard that Harry had seen on men who were in one of his primary-school history textbooks. In his hand was a long staff of hardened, polished English Oak. Incorporated into the top of the staff, was a giant, rough-cut, dark-green tourmaline which was at least as big around as his fist, if not larger.

Everyone except Jake and Miranda instinctively and immediately kneeled in his presence; acknowledging his sovereignty over all green living things and honoring his connection with Mother Earth. Smiling gently, he bade them all rise. "Rise, all. Today is a day to celebrate, is it not?"

His voice was low and powerful, but gentle and full of good humor.

Amelia Bones, on the other hand, appeared with only the barest whisper of a crack! Harry smiled. The more power a witch or wizard had, the more silent were his or her comings and goings.

Susan saw her aunt and immediately lit up like a firecracker. Harry could tell that Susan was extremely proud and excited about having her own aunt perform their handfasting ceremony. It was also, Harry thought, a very, very happy thing indeed to have ones' handfasting ceremony happen the way it was supposed to: free of intruders (meaning press, etc.), surrounded by those who loved and cared for you, in a beautiful, peaceful setting.

"Us next" Harry thought to himself, happily.

Hermione somehow heard her beloved's voice in her head, though she didn't know why or how it could be, and so she chose not to contemplate it. Instead, she simply thought "Can't happen soon enough". His natural response was to give her hand a squeeze as he pulled her a little closer.

As Harry, Hermione, Jake and Miranda looked on; the Arch-Druid Cathbad put his hand on Amelia Bones' shoulder and told her that it was time to begin the sanctification ritual.

From a hidden pocket, the Arch-Druid extracted a small container. Amelia, knowing what was about to happen, fell to her knees in front of him; smiling the whole time. With great care, Cathbad poured out a little of the contents onto his fingers and began marking her with it. It had to be some kind of oil Harry figured, because it glistened in the sun and he could smell it from where he and Hermione stood.

He touched Amelia's forehead, the indent at the base of her throat, and then, in an almost sensual manner, the insides of each wrist. When he had finished, he bade her stand. She did so extremely gracefully for someone who was well into her late sixties or early seventies. The Arch-Druid placed a hand on her shoulder and turned her until she faced the sun. Lifting his staff, so that its crystal shined in the sun, Cathbad chanted the ancient prayer that all druids knew:

"Mother Earth, give us, your children,

Strength to do for each other

that which blesses your creation.

Warming sun, light our path and

make each day new and bright.

Father, creator, bless us now

and bless those who pledge themselves here today.

Give them strength for the journey ahead, we pray

For all that we do, that is good and right and pure,

we do in your name. Amen."

As he listened to Cathbad, Harry wondered if he had heard some version of the prayer before, elsewhere. It niggled at him as he tried to recollect where that might have been or why it seemed so familiar.

The ritual of sanctification complete, Amelia Bones turned and smiled at her only niece. But before she could say anything, the

Arch-Druid inscribed an arc in the air with the end of his staff. A powerful rainbow followed its tip; crossing through the sky immediately above the prayer circle. "Let all those who come to pledge themselves this day step forward and be blessed."

Neville intertwined his hands with Padma, Parvati, and Susan and together, the four of them stepped forward. Harry did the same with Hermione and also stepped forward.

Amelia looked at Harry and Hermione for a moment with a question written across her face. The expression resolved itself into words and she said, "Harry Potter, why are you here?"

"We are here to be bonded this day, Minister Bones"

That sent her left eyebrow on a quest to ascend to the heavens. Harry continued, "We have already pledged ourselves in front of witnesses, but we hoped, since you were already here, that you would consent to bond us."

"Do you have rings for each other?"

"We do, Minister Bones", he said, pulling a small pair of boxes from the pocket of his dress robes.

"Very good then. Do you have the consent of your guardian to marry?"

Harry smiled. He was about to drop the proverbial bombshell and even Neville was grinning like mad as he waited for her to register the import of what Harry was about to tell her.

"Don't need it, Minister Bones. I'm emancipated."

The eyebrow that had begun its earlier ascent towards heaven seemed to redouble its efforts to leave her face and climb skyward as she said, "Oh? And how might that have come to be, Harry?"

Harry's grin threatened to permanently connect one ear to the other as he stepped towards her by two steps and lifted his left hand, so that she might see the ring of lordship that he was wearing.

She looked at the Gryffindor lion, gleaming in the sun as it magically marched its way around the sapphire stone which lay centered in his ring and the words Opus productum maiestas. "Majesty comes from deeds"

She fainted.

"Pay me, Harry" Neville whispered with laughter in his voice, just loudly enough that only Harry, Hermione, and the other girls heard what he said.

"Later, thief" Harry whispered back, feeling chagrined and more than a little cheated out of the ten galleons that Neville had just earned.

Augusta Longbottom stepped forward, said "Was that really necessary, Lord Gryffindor?", and then enervated the Minister, after looking at Harry with a jaundiced eye.

Harry shrugged. "It was a fair bet, my lady".

The eldest Longbottom looked at Harry and then at Hermione, as if to ask for any kind of help that she might give. Hermione simply rolled her eyes in sort of a 'they're-boys-and-what-can-you-do' kind of way and then squeezed Harry's hand.

Once the Minister was standing, she tried to take in Harry's measure. "Well, Lord Gryffindor, since you wear Godric's ring, I assume that you have been emancipated?"

"Yes, Minister. I am Lord Potter-Gryffindor...or at least that is what the Goblins told me. I'm still not sure I believe it."

She smiled at him; softening a bit as she realized that for everything that he had so miraculously done so far, he was still very much a young man.

"We have much to talk about then, Harry, but now is not the time. We have some bonding, I think, to be getting on with."

Neville and his three very excited brides all smiled at her with anticipation, as did Hermione. "Yes, please" Harry found himself saying.

"Well then, Neville Thomas Longbottom, Lord Designate; Susan Marie Bones, Lady Designate, Padma Lakshimi Patil, Parvati Bimala Patil...are you all prepared to say your vows?"

There was an immediate chorus of 'we are', to which she replied with her own smile, "Good then. Let's be at it. Now come ladies and face your bond-mate to be. Lord Longbottom, come and stand to my right and face your bond-mates".

They did as she bade them and soon, Harry and Hermione were standing with their friends and preparing to officially witness their bonding, as the law and tradition required.

Amelia began with the oldest traditions first. She placed flowers that the Arch-Druid summoned/grew for the occasion and gave them to each of the girls, along with a piece of gem-quality rough green tourmaline and small satchels of dust. To Neville, she gave pieces of cinnamon bark, cedar, and iron-wood.

"Ladies, in your hands you hold red roses, grown from the ground which surrounds us. You also hold pieces of tourmaline. Together, they symbolize the beauty of the earth as well as nature's fury and power – the two things that make the precious stones. You are also holding satchels of dust. That dust represents our beginning and our end. Do not forget that.

Lord Longbottom....Neville. You hold in your hands cinnamon, cedar, and Iron-wood. We give cinnamon because it reminds us that truly, some of the greatest, most wonderful things are found without trying and are special simply because they exist. Your love for your wives and their love for you is special simply because it exists and draws the four of you together in a unique and beautiful way. The Cedar we give to remind us that there is great beauty in longevity as well as something miraculous. Let it remind you to work hard for a long and happy marriage. The Iron-wood is given to remind us about inner-strength and resiliency. There will be times during your married life when you are challenged and need to be strong internally. Do not forget where you come from or what you are, because your heritage and your past, all of it, make you strong. The Longbottoms are part of the Fifteen families. Take pride in your history."

She paused and then turned to look at Susan. "Lady Bones, my dearest niece, do not forget who you are. You are Lady-designate of our family. You will speak for the family next year. Take pride in your family, my dearest, and do not let go of what makes the family special."

Extending a hand to her nieces' shoulder for a moment, she met the younger girls' eyes and said, "and don't forget...don't ever forget...that I love you very much and am very proud of you."

"I love you too, auntie" the beautiful blonde said, wiping away happy tears.

"Ladies, Neville, say your vows to each other now. Neville, you first."

Reaching out with both hands, so he could touch his bond-mates, Neville spoke quietly, but intensely. He told them of his love for them and promised to always love them, no matter the circumstances, in this life and in the next. It wasn't rehearsed – at least not much – but it carried every bit of his love, desire, and devotion.

When he was finished, the girls all had teary eyes. Even Hermione was misty-eyed as she heard Neville speak. It was the three girls' turns next. As each spoke to Neville; promising him her heart, mind, soul, and body, in life and in the next, she was supported by the other two. After all three had pledged their love, loyalty, and fidelity, Amelia stepped forward again and asked them to hold hands and form a semi-circle, with Neville facing them as best he could. She couldn't resist imparting a few additional words of wisdom, figuring that it couldn't hurt and might help in the long run.

"Neville Thomas Longbottom, love these ladies as they love you and remember what Antonne de Saint-Exupery said. "Love does not consist in gazing at each other but looking in the same direction together."

"I will, Minister. I love them more than I can say."

"I can tell, Neville. Now, let's do this." She took out her wand and wove a complex pattern in the air, roughly in the middle of the circle. Neville could feel the powerful magics being invoked and it made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end. It wasn't a bad feeling, but it was obvious that the Minister was no ordinary witch, for the

amount of power that she was summoning. "Redimio suum pectus pectoris redimio suum animus quod permissum nemo hoc vinculum" ("Bind their hearts, bind their souls, and let no one break this bond").

There was a shimmering light all around and suddenly the air was filled with the wonderful smell of Wild Hyacinth. Nice touch, Hermione thought, as she looked over at the smiling Arch-Druid. "You may kiss your brides, Neville".

Kiss them he did, until his great-grandmother started to step forward to separate them for their 'almost' impropriety. Turning, Neville looked at Harry, who couldn't resist stepping forward and giving his best friend a huge, manly hug. "Congratulations, Neville!"

"Thanks, mate. I'm glad you and Hermione were here to see it."

"Wouldn't have missed it" Harry replied honestly, looking at the newly-minted consort/bond-mate.

"You're next" the just ever-so-slightly younger boy said.

"I know", Harry said, "Can't wait".

Hermione saw Harry and Neville finishing their conversation at the same time that she was finishing her quick conversation with the three newly-minted consorts/brides. She maneuvered around them and to Harry's side, so that they were facing Minister Bones in the middle of the prayer circle. Hermione reached a hand back, and signaled her parents to stand with her, to her right side, while Harry signaled Remus and Sirius to come and stand with him. Neville watched as Harry's godfathers moved into position. He wished that it were his place to stand with Harry, but knew that as Harry's only remaining family, it was more important that the two men be there; supporting Harry in his special moment.

Amelia Bones looked at the happy couple and at the two men – the last of the marauders, if the rumors were correct – as she prepared for the bonding ceremony of the last of the Gryffindor family.

Putting on what she hoped was a happier face, she said, "Who comes to offer this young woman into bonded life; into marriage for all eternity?"

Jake and Miranda spoke up. He spoke first. "We do, Ma'am. I, Jacob Edwards Granger", and then she spoke, "And I, Miranda Jane Granger", and then together they said, "We give Hermione Jane Granger to this man, Harold James Potter, Lord Potter-Gryffindor, in marriage for all eternity".

Hermione fought back tears as she heard the pride in her parents' voices.

"Do you, Remus Lupin, and do you, Sirius Orion Black, promise on your honor that this young man knows what he is promising to this young woman today? And do you further promise to support him and defend his marriage to all those who would threaten it?"

"We do" the two men said together.

"Good. Now then, Harry, Hermione, take each others' hands and focus on each other." They did so and almost immediately felt the desperate need to let their magic merge. It was as if their very souls were being pulled together.

"Do you both swear, on your lives and on your magic, to love, cherish, protect and defend each other, in good times and in bad, in sickness or in health, from this day forward and for all eternity?"

"We do"

"And do you promise to share your magic, your thoughts, and your very souls with each other, from this day forward and for all eternity?"

"We do"

"Exchange rings then, and let the rings remind you each and every day of your lives of your promises to each other."

Hermione went first; taking from the small, beautiful blue box a ring of finely crafted platinum that had a circle of small, perfect diamonds woven into an ivy trellis pattern that ran around the ring. Inscribed on the inside of the ring were the words, "From this day forward, with all my love for you forever, HJP"

Harry could feel himself tearing up as his beloved slid the ring onto his finger, next to the ring of lordship that he wore on his middle finger. "I love you"

Almost overcome with the happiness and relief that he was feeling, Harry took Hermione's rings out of their box and showed them to her. They had been his mother's rings. The larger ring had two brilliantly deep blue, triangle-shaped sapphires sitting on either side of the rarest of all stones: a marquise-cut, 2.5 kt., internally flawless, blood-red ruby. It was mated to a platinum band that had flawless diamonds set in all along its girdle. It was the smaller ring that radiated the staggering power that Hermione felt as slid it onto her finger.

They looked at the Minister as she spoke the final words of the 'official' part of the ceremony. "Then by the power granted to me by Her Royal Majesty, Queen Elizabeth the Second, Defender of England, on behalf of all the people, and by magic itself, I bind you both in the covenant of marriage and declare that you are husband and wife, for this life and for all eternity. Kiss your bride, Harry."

The moment that they kissed, a brilliant actinic light sprang up around them. It was so bright that no one could look at it – except for Neville and his brides. He and they noticed that the seven others around the prayer circle were shielding their eyes. Even the Arch-Druid didn't seem to be able to look at the bonded pair directly.

As it started to dissipate, those who hadn't been able to look before suddenly saw what Neville and his three brides had already seen: that Harry and Hermione had changed. It was as if all of their impurities had been burned away and all that was left was pure essence. They weren't tall, really, nor were they more physically mature...but there was still a noticeable difference. It was as if someone had taken sandpaper to a piece of wood and finally gotten down to pure, perfect wood, and then buffed it so that the wood began to have a glow all of its own.

Neville leaned close to his wives and said, "Never do things in half-measures, do they?"

Susan snorted with laughter, as did Padma. Parvati simply giggled.

There was a round of applause for all the newly bonded and then, just as quickly as he had appeared, the Druid began to depart. Neville, however, was faster than he and moved in front of the man; holding up a small, potted plant that had just been surreptitiously handed to him by his great-grandmother.

"Druid Cathbad, for your presence here today, it is my joy to give you this" and he handed the man the plant. "It is Snowdonia Hawkweed and this is the only female plant of its type in the world. I give it to you now, in thanks for your extraordinary presence among us today."

The Arch-Druid was taken aback. The Snowdonia Hawkweed was indeed the rarest plant in the world; found only in one place, on a mountain slope in Wales. "How did you come to find the female, my Lord Longbottom?"

Neville smiled. "Family secret, my Lord Arch-Druid."

The old man returned the smile. He knew all about family grimoires and how the magic they contained was passed from generation to generation. It wasn't the way druids did things, but he understood it, and knew that truly, the young man in front of him couldn't tell him, even if he wanted to, such were the wards and protections on his family's book of magic.

"You have truly given me a gift worthy of a Longbottom. For it, I will grant you one favor, to be called upon at a time and place of your greatest need".

The young Lord had the good sense to incline his head in a respectful bow. "My Lord Arch-Druid, your thanks suffice my needs, but on behalf of the Longbottom family, I accept your gift humbly. Go now with the wind at your back and the sun on your face and always with our thanks and prayers."

The Druid's eyes sparkled with appreciation for the deeply-felt ritual words of departure. "Thank you, my son."

With the plant held up in one hand, the man spread his arms and then seemed to flow back into the landscape, until no trace of him was left.

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With the ceremonies concluded, the twelve made their way down the hill to the family's secure apparition point, which would allow them to make the short journey to the Great Room without having to negotiate the otherwise steep path down the hill by foot.

Once everyone arrived safely, the house-elves set to providing refreshments and food, since most all of them had not eaten since just after dawn.

A half-hour into the festivities, Amelia Bones began to take her leave; first thanking the Longbottom Matriarch for inviting her and then Neville, for being the kind of husband she had always hoped for Susan. Blushing, he accepted her hug and thanked her for the encouragement and support. She waved to everyone and then disappeared in the blue and white light of a well-made portkey

Settling down, the happy group talked and ate and then talked so more. Presents were opened all around and there was a convivial, happy feeling all around.

Eventually though, it started to become apparent to the adults in the room that 'the kids' were very much at ease with their newly bonded/hand-fastened status and that they had no intention of hiding their affections. Three separate times, Augusta had to get Neville's attention away from snogging his three wives and she was growing weary of it.

"Neville!" she said forcefully, "Stop it. I grow tired of seeing you search for your wives' tonsils."

He thought about it for a moment and then said, "I am sorry you feel that way. Perhaps if I were to take my wives elsewhere it might be better for all concerned."

Harry wasn't so totally lost in Hermione that he didn't hear the tension in his best mate's voice, though kissing his beautiful bride definitely precluded actually looking at his male friend at that particular moment.

Touching her husbands' face with her soft hand, Hermione broke the kiss for a moment – just long enough, really, to whisper to him.

When she was done, Harry lifted his beloved up and off his lap and made his way over to Neville. Every adult eye in the room was on him as he bent at the waist and said something very quietly to his friend and confidant.

In turn, when Harry was finished, Neville rose as well and lifted Susan up and off his lap. The girls fell in behind him and he, and they, along with Harry and Hermione, gathered in the middle of the room and then suddenly disappeared.

All the adults were instantly alarmed and got up and began fanning out to search for the missing teens. It was a big house, surrounded by an insane amount of acreage, and they all knew that it would take some time to search. One they were all gone, Harry, Neville, his wives, and Hermione faded back into view. Their mass disillusionment charm, along with Harry and Hermione's simultaneously-cast 'notice-me-not' charms, and their well-timed micro-concussion charm tricked all of the adults into thinking that the group had actually disappeared.

Claiming the sofa for their own, Neville and his brides made strategic use of its space; sharing it so that Neville could kiss all of his brides in turn, and at his leisure, while Harry and Hermione made good use of the oversized love-seat that Sirius Black had been sitting in just a few moments before.

"That was awesome Harry", Hermione said to him quietly, in between heated kisses and not-so-shy caresses.

"It was thanks to you love, really. That concussion hex was what made them believe we'd disappeared."

Hermione giggled and then said, even as she felt his hand making its way up under her skirt, "My mother never thought I'd make it as an actress, even though I really liked being on stage."

She moaned into his mouth as she felt his fingers reach the apex of her legs and begin caressing her sex. It was something they had begun exploring in earnest the night before, but hadn't had a chance to really follow through on. "Let's make love tonight, Harry."

"I didn't want to rush you last night, love...but yes, let's." He said, as his fingers continued to caress her through the silkiness of her knickers.

He wasn't alone. On the sofa, sitting between Padma and Parvati, Neville was taking the opportunity to pleasure both in a similar fashion while simultaneously being kissed by Susan.

Almost twenty-five tremendously satisfying minutes ticked by before there was the distinctive pop! that always signaled the arrival of a house-elf nearby. It shook everyone out of his/her erotic fog and made the six sit up, disengage, and attempt to make themselves presentable.

It was a close thing, too, because a moment later, the eldest Longbottom suddenly appeared right in the middle of the room. She looked very, very unhappy.

However, her ire was immediately banked by the timely arrival of the rest of the group, including Hermione's parents.

"There you are! Hermione! We were worried about you. We thought you had left..."

Hermione looked up at her mother from where she sat. "That was kind of the point."

"What do you mean, Hermione?" Her father asked.

"We needed some 'alone' time, so we made you all think we had left. When you left to find us, we reappeared and went back to what we wanted to be doing."

Sirius threw his head back and roared with laughter. "Well done, both of you. That was quite a trick. You had us completely fooled."

Remus, the more serious of Harry's two godfathers, looked at the pair of them. "First, you two are in my seat, and second, you're going to have to tell us how you managed that little trick."

Harry cocked an eyebrow at the werewolf and said, "First, the seat's ours, since you left, and second, we'll tell you how we did it when

we're ready to. In the mean time, today is my wedding day and I intend to enjoy every bit of it with my wife."

It wasn't worth pushing the point, especially as it was his godson's wedding day. James would not have appreciated him doing so and he trusted that one day, he'd have to explain all of his actions to James and Lily.

'Not to mention the fact that Hermione had recently climaxed'. He could tell by the incredible amount of female pheromones in the air. Looking over at the three girls on Neville's lap, he was also pretty sure that Hermione hadn't been alone in her pleasure, either.

It was, unfortunately, all that there was time for, given the fact that the most powerful wizard in all of Europe, not include the psychopathic Tom Riddle, was going to be after them shortly.

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The talk eventually turned to what was going to have to happen next, irrespective of the fact that neither couple was going to really get a honeymoon – at least not initially.

There was, all knew, a great deal to be done and very short time frame in which to do it. Over the next several hours, once Hermione, Harry, Neville, and his wives all changed out of their dress clothes and they had collectively resigned themselves to the fact that there just wasn't going to be time to do what their bodies were longing for, lists were made, plans created, and provisions for travel assembled.

At one point, Hermione's parents had to excuse themselves and travel as far as the edge of the house-wards, so that they could use their mobile phones. They had to make fairly quick plans to transfer control of their medical practice to their partners until the day that they could safely return to England and that meant calling their solicitors. It also meant calling their employees – which was a risk, but had to be done for both moral and ethical reasons – and because they had worked with them for years and had deep and abiding feelings of appreciation and friendship for all of them.

Satisfied that their practice would be in good hands and would run successfully with them gone, Jake and Miranda made the ½ mile walk back to the Longbottom's main house. As they did so, they took

in the view, which was admittedly spectacular. Set at the mouth of the valley, just below the where the path which led up the drumlin began, it was an amazing, panoramic, green vista.

Jake and Miranda were, in comparison to most Brits, very, very wealthy. Their practice had been producing net revenue of six to eight million pounds a year for the better part of Hermione's whole life and they had invested overseas in government-secured bonds as well as in oil, natural gas, and a company that had been recommended to them – Tata Steel Corp. All of their investments, taken in aggregate, had produced yearly returns of 21 – 27% and individually, some had returned as much as 40%, once dividends were factored in.

They had no financial worries of any sort and they were comfortable with the idea of living abroad with Harry and Hermione and whomever else came along.

Even given their holdings, they realized that the Longbottoms were at an entirely different level of wealth – one that was measured in the hundreds of millions of quid. It was evident by the fact that the family owned the entire valley – close to sixteen square miles – and like the Royal family itself, was one of the richest families in England.

Jake didn't know, nor could he have known, that the Potters were at least one order of magnitude wealthier than the Longbottoms; measuring the galleons in their vaults in the billions.

Even Harry didn't know the full extent of his holdings, though he was aware that they were extensive, given the fact that he had just become the majority inheritor of the Gryffindor wealth on top of what he already held by dint of the fact that he was the last of the Potters and therefore the family's sole inheritor.

"Do you think you'd be able to deal with this kind of wealth?" Jake asked her as they finished their walk back.

Miranda looked at him and shook her head. "It's too much. I like getting out and working and using my skills. Having a place like this.....I'd be tied to it too much. It's just too big."

Jake was of the same mind. He liked the wealth that they had brought in and was feeling good about where they were financially,

but he had limits, too. One of the limits was the point at which he thought that it would be impossible to give away, because it was accumulating too fast. He suspected that the Longbottoms were pretty far past that point and that even if they tried, they could never give it all away without creating the most dire distress for others. Bill Gates was the name that everyone knew as being the primary example of a person having that problem. However, there were others, and he was pretty sure that the Longbottoms (if Forbes knew about them) would have made the "world's richest" list.

When they got back to the main doors, they were met by two of the family's house-elves, Dulcette (whom Miranda had already met) and Syboa, whom none of them had seen before. Syboa was unlike any elf Miranda could have ever imagined, even after meeting Dulcette. Not only was Syboa taller by at least six inches, but her skin was coffee-colored and her ears were smaller and slightly more rounded. Additionally, Syboa looked distinctly female, at least as close to "standard" female as a non-human species could look.

Beyond that, Syboa had a wand tucked into her belt and was wearing jewelry.

Both Miranda and Jake were slightly dumbfounded by the taller elf's presence and unsure of what to say to her. They were spared having to make conversation when Hermione and Neville showed up in the front hall. "Mom, Dad. We thought you two had gotten lost."

"Ah....no. We just took our time walking back. Had some things to talk about."

Neville looked at them and said, "I see you've met Syboa."

"Not really, no. We were about to introduce ourselves...."

Neville, astute as he was about the comfort of guests (a skill that had been studiously drilled into him by Augusta), he said, "Well, let me fix that. Syboa, I want you to meet one of my best friends' parents, Jake and Miranda Granger. They are Muggles, but are being taught about the wizarding world. They are going to travel with us overseas, so we can get away from the bad man with the overly-long nose and the crazy snake-man"

Syboa seemed to brighten at this. "Greybeard is an enemy of my people. If you are against him, then I am your friend."

"You'd be proud of my husband then, Syboa. He defeated 'Greybeard' yesterday in a battle."

Jake colored slightly at his wife's exaggeration, but let it go, figuring that there was no point in hashing out the whole story.

The beautiful elf's ears started wiggling and a bright smile came to her face. "Then I am most definitely your friend, sir! Heroes are those who take on "Greybeard" and live to tell about it! I shall tell all my people about you! You will be celebrated!"

She raced forward, hugged Jake around the upper leg, and then disappeared without a sound.

On the whole, Jake found it to be a very, very weird experience....and one that he'd definitely be 'talking' to his wife about later. There would be a ruler or a paddle involved, if he had his way, during their 'talk'.

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The afternoon bled into evening and it was clear that not everything that they needed to accomplish as a group was going to be done by the deadline that they had set for themselves.

One good thing that did happen was the return of the Weasley Twins. They had taken off shortly before the bonding ceremony, claiming that such a ceremony was far too private for them to be involved with – not that they didn't want to be – but that their sense of propriety wouldn't allow it.

When they appeared, each was carrying a tote-bag that had, in large, luridly-green, sparkly letters on the side "WWW, Inc." The bags looked suspiciously like ones used by Marks & Spencer, Harry thought.

"Oy, mates!" Fred Weasley said as he put his bag down. "We've closed up the entire shop and shrunk it all down to these two bags. Even brought along our experimental stuff and our lab!"

Harry and Neville were especially excited about that. George, the ever-so-slightly older twin said, "We've also convinced Verity to join us. She's a wiz with figures and with running the business, but she's half-blood and she doesn't want to be in the middle of a war between greybeard and moldyshorts."

It was great news, Harry thought. Since about 2 pm, they had made successful contact with everyone that they had originally listed, plus a few whom he hadn't thought of. Sirius had gotten in contact with his cousin, Nymphadora Tonks, who was a young Auror, and convinced her and her parents to leave with them.

Hermione turned in Harry's lap and looked at him, disrupting the pad of paper and pen that she had been balancing. "Harry, with Verity coming along, we're up over sixty people. Just counting the students from our year and Luna's year, Hogwarts is going to take a huge hit."

"We've still got to get Oliver Wood, Alicia Spinnet, Angelina Johnson, and Lee Jordan if we can. They're going to get hammered if this war goes the way that Remus and Sirius think it's going to."

Neville and the twins came over to where Harry was sitting with Hermione, because it was plain from the expression on his face that he was concerned. The Twins knew his expressions well enough that they too grabbed chairs and sat down close to him.

Hermione gently ran her fingers through his hair, trying to calm him down. She could feel the storm-clouds of worry gathering in his soul and she could hear the thoughts that he wasn't expressing to the group. They had discovered that the rings which they had exchanged during their bonding ceremony were much, much more powerful and important than anyone could have imagined. Not only did they allow the two of them to share thoughts/feelings/emotions when they chose to do so, but both of them knew with total certainty where the other was at all times.

Not only that, but the rings rendered the wearer totally and completely invisible on demand – which was a huge plus, no matter how one looked at it.

Privately, Harry thought that there was every possibility that the rings, when touching, might protect against even the most powerful

of curses. Not that he really wanted to test his theory, but it might be a powerful asset in a bad situation.

One thing that had bothered Harry, which the adults around them seemed to be taking for granted, was getting out of the country safely and quickly. Even with portkeys, which supposedly had a longer range than apparition, there was an effective maximum distance. Then Harry smiled to himself, as he watched Hermione make a zooming motion with her hand....like an airplane.

Suddenly he felt Hermione's presence in his mind. It was a warm, soft touch, not unlike the times when she caressed his face with her hands. "Yes, Harry. We're going to charter a very large plane for all of us. We're going to go together, out of a private terminal, and Dumbledore will not be the wiser for it."

"Can we do it in such a way as to make it look like we're still here? Create some kind of illusion or something?"

Hermione didn't immediately respond to his question. It wasn't that it was a bad question, but rather that it was a *good* idea that she thought was worth more than a passing consideration. "I'll ask Remus and Sirius. They've both been Aurors and they should know if it's even possible. If it is, we might be able to leave behind 'copies' of ourselves...at least long enough for all of us to get out."

"We have to buy ourselves at least twelve hours. After that, it won't matter."

"Should we tell the others about this idea?" Hermione wondered silently to him.

"Just Remus, Sirius, and your parents. Your father can help pick the airline and I can front the money. If someone can get me back to Gringotts, I'm sure they can help us do it."

Suddenly, both Hermione and Harry felt hands roughly shaking them. "Hey! Snap out of it!" Hermione 'came to' first and looked up at Neville. He was standing over her, with his hand still on her right shoulder.

"What!"

Neville looked at her and at his best friend and said, "You two suddenly zoned off to Merlin-knows-where and stopped talking to us. It was like you had gone into some kind of trance."

"Uh oh" Harry whispered in Hermione's ear.

All Hermione could do was nod in response, not wanting to give anything away. The new form of communication was just too private, too special, to be shared with anyone else. Not even her parents, Sirius or Remus.

"We're sorry" Harry said. "We were both up so early that we just kind of....faded for a moment. We probably should get a cup of tea or some good coffee or something."

Squeezing Harry's hand, Hermione signaled her approval of his idea. She didn't usually agree with using caffeine as a means of keeping awake, when there were much better magical means of staying awake, but it was pretty obvious that they were going to have to do something as a cover for suddenly losing focus on everyone else and it seemed like an entirely plausible reason for not being entirely 'with it' in front of their friends.

Neville shrugged and backed off from the couple; retreating to the company of his own wives. Fred and George backed off a bit as well and soon discussions were underway regarding how they were going to arrange for everyone to get to one spot and where that spot ought to be.

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06:30 Hours - the next morning

Weary from the long night of planning and doing, the full group assembled in the first-floor sun room of the east wing of the palatial estate. Everyone was dressed for travel: Comfortable shoes, light jackets, and all the necessary travel documents. The house elves of several different houses had worked late into the night to help make everything happen, as had the Goblins of Gringotts (for an extra 5% fee, of course).

The after-hours concierge bankers at Barclay's had even put in several long hours assembling and then transmitting most, but not

all, of the Grangers' considerable holdings to accounts the Grangers had quickly establish with Barclay's US subsidiary, Barclays Capital, Inc.

Once everyone was satisfied that his/her things, financial and tangible, were taken care of, the group planned to a simultaneous portkey to make the jump to the regional airport at Stornoway. From there, they intended to have everyone board a chartered, unmarked Boeing 727-200 and get the hell out of dodge.

Both Remus and Sirius knew that the rule which trumped all others in planning was "Kein Kampfplan überlebt Kontakt mit dem Feind." or "No battle plan survives first contact with the enemy" [Gen. Helmuth von Moltke, Senior, ~1864], and so both had taken care to plan for contingencies. However, it was impossible to plan for everything.

Just as Harry, Hermione, Neville, Susan, Padma, Parvati, and the Weasley Twins had settled down at the long granite-topped counter for breakfast, alarms started going off all over the house.

The two retired Aurors who had been out on the patio watching the sunrise came haring into the house, with the Grangers right behind them. "Time to go, folks. There are a dozen or more Aurors on the perimeter of the property and I'll bet anything they have ward-breakers with them. How they found us so quickly, I don't know, but it's definitely time to go."

Just as he said it, there was a huge, loud crash; almost like the thunderclap of lightning. Sirius looked at them all, even as Remus took the long towel that lay on the bar, cast a quick Engorgio charm on it, and then turned it into the portkey that they all needed.

"OK people, that was one of the major wards coming down. We have two minutes before they're here and we can't afford to be caught. Gather whatever you need and be back here in one minute. I want us long-gone by the time they reach here."

A voice called out from behind them. "Do what you must, Sirius. They'll not be getting past me."

Everyone, including Neville, turned and saw his great-grandmother looking like he had never seen her before. Gone were her dress

robes and slightly crazy hats. In their place was a black, dragon-hide battle robe. She was holding her wand in one hand and a gun in the other. "I'll hold them off to give you all time."

"NO!" Neville screamed. "You can't! I need you!"

She looked at him, with both pain and regret in her eyes. "I love you too, Neville. You've been a son to me and you've been my great joy"...

Neville ran over to her and embraced her in a hug that even Harry could feel from where he stood. There were tears in Neville's eyes, as there were in those of his wives. Suddenly, what they were about to do became real to all of them.

She held him tight and said into his ear, "Go now, my son. I love you. I always have and I always will. You are Lord Longbottom now."

She pushed him away and towards the group. The last thing he remembered of her, before the portkey pulled him away, was her smile and her hands crossed over her chest, in the universal sign of embrace.

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When Amelia Bones was summoned to the property thirty minutes later, the entire wedding party was gone, except for her best friend and confidant, Augusta. Her body lay across the sofa which faced the sun in the sun-room of the east wing, exactly where she had fallen. To Amelia's horror, she saw the bodies of sixteen dead Aurors and two dead house-elves.

"What Happened here, Rufus?" she demanded, in a voice that was cold and full of malice.

Not a man who usually coward in front of superiors, Rufus Scrimgeour shrank a bit under her gaze. It wasn't often that the Minister for Magic him/herself appeared at a crime-scene and rarer still were those times when so many MLE officers were lost all at once.

"I....I don't know, Minister. There are signs of spell-fire all around and we're still sorting out who did what. I can tell you that Augusta

was killed by the killing curse...but it wasn't by anyone whose wand is present right now."

"Find Neville Longbottom, and then find that person. Do it right now, Rufus, if you value your hide."

"Yes, Minister"

She turned and walked away, trying to compose herself before dealing with the press and those in her cabinet.

There would be a time and a place for tears later, she knew, but she had things to do in the here-and-now that could not wait. The Matriarch of one of the Fifteen had been brutally murdered in highly suspicious circumstances and she was going to have to tell them herself, in Privy Council, what she knew and what she didn't know.

Looking around, she realized that she had just as much right to investigate what had happened as anyone at MLE and that it was probably a good idea to have a first-hand account of what there was to be discovered. She owed it to Neville to do at least that much.

Casting aside her emotions for a moment, she closed her eyes and then took out her wand. When she was calm enough, she began incanting in an old Sumerian dialect that her father had taught her. Soon the charm was complete and she released it into the room.

At first, nothing happened, and then slowly, one after the other, she could see ghostly traces of spell-fire in her mind's eye. She traced them back to their casters and watched with satisfaction as her friend Augusta defended herself like a woman half her age. She watched, too, as the two house-elves attacked again and again, until they too were cut down by the killing curse.

She saw as three times, the Unforgivable curse leapt from one particular wand...but somehow, she couldn't see the face of the person. The person's magic felt familiar, but she couldn't pin it down and it frustrated her.

When she felt like she couldn't discover anything more, she canceled the charm and turned back towards the magical forensics team that was scouring the house.

All that had been found so far was a torn pair of white cotton knickers in the upstairs master-suite. She wondered privately which girl they had belonged to: Hermione or one of Neville's brides. Probably Hermione, she thought, given the fact that the knickers were from a Muggle manufacturer.

Walking over to where Rufus stood, she asked the question that she should have asked right at the beginning. "Rufus, who ordered the Aurors to be here?"

Shaking his head, he said, "That's the problem. The person who's in charge of dispatch has no memory of ordering the assault and there's no record of it in the books."

Amelia nodded. The same thing had happened the last time Riddle came to power. "Probably either memory-charmed or the Imperious-curse was used. Get someone from the Unspeakables to see if he/she can work some magic and figure out who did it. Also, see if there is a record of who created the portkey that brought all of the Aurors here."

Rufus knew better than to argue with the Minister for Magic and for once, he agreed with what she was doing....because they were the same things that he would have done were their places reversed.

"Yes, Minister. We'll get on it right now."

"Good, Rufus. I might just have to keep you after all" she said, with a small smile.

"Thank you, Minister. I appreciate that" he replied softly, before turning back to his men and the job at hand.

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Boeing 727-200, US. Reg. N-20468, over the Atlantic Ocean, an hour later.

A pleasant male voice came over the intercom just as many of the passengers were laying back for a good sleep. "This is the captain. Your attention please. We've just cleared our cruising altitude of 37,000 feet on our way to Boston, Massachusetts. We will be passing over Iceland, Greenland, and then heading south, along the

Maine coastline. Our arrival time is 18:45 hours, for a total flight time of four hours, forty-five minutes. We will disembark at hanger 6, in the foreign trade zone section. Please have your passports ready for inspection and have all of your declaration paperwork in order. We will be met by customs officials after we have deplaned. If you have any questions, please see the attendants. Thank you."

The speaker went silent. Harry reached into Hermione's lap and took her soft hand in his. "I love you. We'd not have gotten out in such good shape if you hadn't been so brilliant."

Hermione looked at her husband with tears in her eyes. Harry could tell, because of their rings, what she was feeling and where her thoughts were centered. She was dwelling on Augusta's sacrifice and what it meant to Neville.

Neville had been, up until a few minutes before the Captain's announcement, stoic and resolute, but both he and Hermione could hear their best friend, a few rows back, crying quietly in his wives' arms.

Harry counted himself lucky that he had his beautiful, loving wife and both of his godfathers with him on the plane. It was more than some had escaped with and less than the number for which Harry had hoped.

In the end, one hundred eighty-seven people boarded the white-and-blue transatlantic airliner that had parked at Hanger no. 17 in Stornoway, Scotland, destined for Boston/Logan International Airport. That included quite a few entire families, as well as both single fathers and mothers who had chosen to run and live and fight another day, rather than stay and die.

Harry and Hermione had quietly, and happily, paid the \$500,000+ fee that it had taken to charter the massive plane from Pegasus Aviation Corp. of San Francisco, CA. and counted every single dollar spent in lives saved. It was worth it, they both knew, even if it had cost them ten or a hundred times the amount.

"What do we do when we get to Boston?" Hermione asked him.

"Hotel, first, and then an organizational meeting. We're going to need some help from Remus' friends at the Salem School to get

everyone situated. I'm of the mind that we ought to press on and get up into New Hampshire and make our presence known to the Headmistress at the White Mountain School, but that's something that we'll all have to talk about. We have until August 31st, one way or the other, to deal with that."

She nodded. Harry was right about their time-frame, but not necessarily about where they ought to end up finally. Based on the information she'd been able to gather, she was of the mind that they ought to head to L'Ecole Magique du Quebec, just outside Quebec City, in Trois Riviere. The Headmistress there was the previous Minister for Magic for New France (magical Canada) and she had a solid reputation for fairness and excellence.

"Really?" she felt/heard Harry say in her mind.

"Yes, love. I'm sorry I didn't bring it up earlier, but I didn't want to start something that would get you angry. You were dealing with a lot."

Harry felt her reticence and her abiding love for him, and knew that Hermione wanted only the best for them. "I can deal with that. It means I'm going to have to learn French though, doesn't it?"

"There are charms for that, Harry, and since I know French, I'm willing to bet that you can learn it from my mind."

Harry started thinking about what he associated with the French and with France and suddenly had the image of Hermione as a sultry French girl, wearing an impossibly short skirt and top, and flirting with him along a river-bank in Paris, on a sunny afternoon.

"Oh? Is that how it is? Well, we'll just see about that!" She smirked at him, mentally, daring him to do his worst.

He did.

Reaching up, he slid the fingers of his left hand into her shirt, surrounded her right breast with his hand, and caressed her pebble-hard nipple in between two fingers, while at the same time whispering to her in Parsel-tongue and running his free hand through her silky hair.

How long that went on, she wasn't sure, but eventually Hermione slid down in her cramped chair a bit as she felt the waves of orgasmic desire suddenly wash over her. A flood of wetness seeped into her knickers and she moaned...louder and longer than she could have ever imagined.

" god, Harry!"

A few minutes later, after she had composed herself somewhat, she realized that she was wrecked. "That's so not fair, you know." She thought to him, with her eyes closed.

"Not meant to be fair, love. It's meant to be good."

"Prat. You KNOW it's good. My knickers are soaked and I'm sure there's a wet-spot on the front of my jeans."

"Are you a witch or aren't you?"

Hermione blushed furiously and then leaned in for a passionate, loving kiss. "I'm your witch, Harry. Now and forever."

For the moment, it was enough.

As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. They are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Office of the Editor, the Daily Prophet, June 21, 1995 – 6:45 AM

Inkwell Blaine, the Third sat in his office, looking at the printers' copy of the morning's paper. He was still reading 'above the fold' wondering what his star reporters' newest article was going to do to the power-structure in the Ministry, as his senior deputy, Gordon Potts, entered the office.

"Rita's sure kicked over a hornets' nest this time, Blaine" he said, taking a sip of his coffee.

Blaine grunted noncommittally.

"Potter might not take this well, boss."

That got his bosses' attention. "What do you mean, Gordon?"

"I mean that Potter is known to be pretty protective of his friends and it probably doesn't do us any good to be printing doctored photos of his new bride"

Inkwell Blaine turned in his chair so that the two men were facing one another. "What's he going to do? Have us arrested or something? We both know his reach isn't that long. Besides, the girl's a mudblood. What do we care? It sells papers and given how influential some of our supporters are, I'm not worried."

Gordon Potts thought that his boss ought to care a great deal, irrespective of whether Lucius Malfoy or Madame Umbridge supported the paper, but he didn't immediately say anything. He had heard stories about what Harry Potter had done during the Tri-Wizard Tournament...including facing down a full-grown, angry female Hungarian Horntail dragon and living to tell about it. And if that wasn't enough, there were strong rumors that Potter had killed, by himself, a sixty-foot long Basilisk. The thought of facing one of the greatest nightmares of the wizarding world terrified him as an adult and he just couldn't fathom how a twelve-year old boy had done it.

Gordon left the Editor-in-Chief's office with the thought that Harry Potter's reach was actually a great deal longer than anyone supposed and that slandering his new bride was probably an act of suicide...whether Inkwell Blaine knew it or not.

The OTHER headline in the paper, while less sensationalistic, was probably more important...at least in the short to medium term. The murder of the Matriarch of one of the Fifteen families and the death of twelve Aurors portended bad things. What specifically, he wasn't sure, but definitely bad.

He was sure that the shit was going to hit the floo when the paper was finally distributed and wished, not for the first time, that his name wasn't on the masthead.

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08:15 AM, Office of the Deputy Headmistress, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

The beautiful white owl glided effortlessly down from the upper-most window that was open in the Deputy Headmistress' study and came to rest on her shoulder. She had watched her downward spiral with admiration and was comforted, after a fact, by the owl's presence.

"Have something for me, girl?"

Hedwig held out one leg – the one with the secure, miniaturized letter-tube attached – and let the matriarch of Clan McGonagall untie it.

The tube itself was very, very heavily warded, which the Deputy Headmistress found odd. Muttering to herself, she said "Just what have you done here, Mr. Potter?" as she pricked her finger and smeared the blood on the tube.

The tube obediently popped open, allowing her to withdraw the scroll that lived within. She was somewhat amazed when the tube unfurled by itself, in midair, and she heard Hermione's disembodied voice saying, "What did your brother call you when you first transformed for him?"

"Kitty-bum flea-bag" the old woman said out-loud, a trifle embarrassed that her protégé knew that particular secret.

Immediately, letters began appearing on the scroll, and she began reading.

June 21, 1995

04:45 AM EST

Dear Prof. McGonagall,

I wanted to write to you and let you know, if you didn't already, that Elvis has left the building. You might want to spend some time singing some of his greatest hits. I particularly liked his Italian favorite.

Love always,

Ganache

Minerva smiled. Hermione was nothing, if not creative. "Ganache" was Minerva's very private nickname for her, because of Hermione's tremendous love of all things dark chocolate. The playing around with Muggle musical references was classically brilliant she thought, as no one as far as she knew, other than Muggle-born students, would have any idea about the song to which she was referring.

In a slightly quavering voice, she sang softly:

"It's now or never, come hold me tight
Kiss me my darling,

be mine tonight
Tomorrow will be too late,
it's now or never...
My love won't wait."

-Elvis Presley

The fancy, scrolling text disappeared suddenly, replaced by Hermione's traditional compact, slightly-italicized script. The missive went on for several pages and detailed a history of events over a fourteen-year period that made her increasingly ill with every new revelation. By the end of it, Minerva McGonagall knew what she had to do. It was hugely risky, but if successful, would be worth it. The information contained in the letter gave her enough ammunition as well as motivation to be willing to risk her own life to see it through.

Gathering up her belongings, she began planning. She had to be gone by nightfall at the very latest, because that was when Albus Dumbledore would return to the Castle.

Calling her family's elves to her side, she gave them quiet, detailed instructions about what she needed done. When she was finished, she gave each a personal hug and a kiss and told them that if she didn't see them again, that she loved them and was grateful to have known them.

Myrtle, Grayson, and Henri looked at her with tremendous sadness in their eyes and promised, in turn, that they would do everything they could to make her proud of them. She blessed them and sent them on their way...before the overwhelming urge to sit and cry overtook her and embarrassed them all.

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In a subterranean cavern, 50 miles south and east of Glaumbaer, Iceland – late morning, June 21, 1995

Filius Flitwick looked at his great cousin, Griphook, and wondered how it was that the wizarding world could have fallen so far that the magic he saw being used now was no longer being taught anywhere except by the few small enclaves of goblin wizards. The river of molten lava flowed by them, not three hundred meters away, and yet they were all untouched by its ferocious heat or killing vapors.

Griphook lifted his clawed hand and pointed at the Ore-Smith as he once again lifted his calloused, black hands and made a massive stream of lava leave its channel. The red-hot rock sailed gracefully towards the massive, waiting holes where it would be separated into its constituent parts.

Nothing ever went to waste and Filius watched with tremendous appreciation for the magic being employed. It was both powerful and subtle – two qualities that he tried, and mostly failed, to impress upon his charms students.

As he watched the chief Gringotts Ore-Smith weave the complex magics, the half-Goblin professor thought about the things he could have done with his life, besides teaching and dueling, and realized

that perhaps he should have spent time learning propagating Goblin magic. 'Perhaps there's still time' he thought, as the Ore-Smith started breaking the lava down into its base components – including gold, silver, and pure carbon.

Just as he was about to ask a question of one of the Ore-Smith's assistants, a glowing white, kneazle-Patronus appeared out of nowhere, coming to rest right in front of him. All of the Goblins around him recognized it for what it had to be and looked at him expectantly, wondering what would happen next.

Filius smiled. It was the Patronus that only Minerva McGonagall could produce. Touching it, he silently absorbed the message that it contained, causing the Patronus itself to fade away.

The message it carried was clear and to the point, if not just a little bit shocking. All it said was: "Caput capitis proditor nos. Adveho domus statim." ('The head has betrayed us. Return home immediately')

Turning to Griphook, who was several feet away, the fifteen-time All-European Dueling Champion walked over and said, "Forgive me, cousin. I would stay and learn of the magic that is being done here today, but duty calls and I fear that things have soured, or worse. Either way, I must go."

Griphook didn't smile, for such was the nature of Goblins that work was something that was just an accepted part of life, like breathing or eating. "May your every duty be profitable, Filius."

"And may your gold so flow as to cause the maker himself to be jealous." Filius said, with affection, before taking his leave and disappearing without a sound.

In a well-guarded, spacious office, fourteen floors below ground, Amelia Bones, the Minister for Magic, received a missive similar to the one that had interrupted Filius Flitwick; causing her to postpone all of her afternoon meetings and flee away to a previously unknown address on the edge of the Hogwarts wards.

Four hundred forty-five miles away, in the highlands of Mallaig, Scotland, above the broad, green valley and the railway station where the GWR 4900 Class 5972 "Hogwarts Express" came to rest

every September First, Deputy Headmistress Minerva McGonagall waited nervously for her hoped-for compatriots to arrive. There were so many things riding on what would happen between the her colleague and her friend that she dared not think about what might go wrong if they didn't believe her.

Pacing back and forth in her office, someone looking in might have thought that she was more cat than person and in truth, her mannerisms were those of someone who had decades of experience being in and living with her animagus form, with all of its peculiarities.

Finally, a gong sounded, announcing the imminent arrival of a witch or wizard by portkey or by apparition. A moment later, Minister for Magic Amelia Bones appeared, wand out and shields-up. Since she was the Minister for Magic, being keyed into the schools' wards was one of the allowances that was made for her.

When the Deputy Headmistress saw her she said quickly, "Who was I with when we first met?" to which the Minister for Magic answered happily, "That scoundrel brother of yours, Shane"

Both women smiled happily and lowered their wands.

A moment later, Filius Flitwick appeared in the office via floo. His arrival wasn't challenged, though, because of the inordinate number of safeguards that her floo had on it. Only those who had been cleared through the blood-ward and who knew the password could access it safely. All others would find themselves swimming in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a long way from anywhere.

Helping the diminutive professor to his feet, Minerva touched her lips with one finger and then reached out and touched his forehead in the same manner. It was a very, very Goblin gesture, which was done only among those who considered themselves family or as close as family.

He accepted the gesture and the feeling behind it and then smiled. "I feel the same, Minerva. Now, tell me why you've called me back. I was with my cousin and he is unhappy that I had to leave."

Knowing that he'd feel defensive for his cousin's time and station, Minerva immediately proffered the scroll which she had received

from Hermione; singing the first two bars of the requisite song so as to activate the actual contents. "Read that, Filius and then pass it to Amelia. It says everything that needs to be said. I'll take your questions when you're done."

Filius took the scroll and sat himself down on a low stool to read it. While he did so, Amelia started in on Minerva.

"You need to know some things, Minerva, and it's not going to be easy for you to hear some of them. What I have to tell you may mean that Hogwarts will not re-open this fall."

The slightly older woman simply nodded. It wasn't news to her, after Hermione's missive, and given what she was preparing to do after her friends left, was probably never going to be her concern again.

Amelia noticed that her palms were sweating, even though she had no genuine reason to be nervous. "I was at the Longbottom Estate two days ago; to preside over a hand-fasting and a bonding ceremony. I think you can already guess who the two were who were being bonded...."

"Harry and Hermione. I know. It's in the scroll."

"It's true, Minnie. But, they weren't the only ones making promises. Neville Longbottom was hand-fasted to my niece....as well as the Patil twins."

It made sense, after a fashion, though she might have expected Harry to be the one to end up with a harem. The Longbottom fortune was almost as vast as its landholdings, which was saying something indeed.

"How did he do?" she asked, quietly.

"Fine, Minnie. He did just fine. Harry stood for him, while Hermione stood for the three girls. The Arch-Druid was present and blessed the ceremony. I hadn't expected his presence, but it was good to have him there."

Minnie knew Cathbad, of course, and liked the man as well. He was a bit old-fashioned, she thought, but acknowledged privately that he had succeeded in propagating Druidism throughout the United

Kingdom and had instituted changes which would keep the Muggles out of Stonehenge, and places like it, probably forever.

The Arch-Druid was also a known, completely neutral party and his status as such was respected by both sides. Riddle had left him and his followers alone during the last war and there was no reason to expect that anything different would happen this time.

"Did anything happen that was unusual?" The deputy Headmistress asked gently.

Amelia thought about it for a moment and then said, "Two things, actually. First – Harry and Hermione? Soul bond, for sure. Actinic-white, blinding light. Couldn't even look at it, it was so intense. Never seen anything like it. Heard rumors about such things happening, but never, ever seen it. I could feel the power coming off the two of them and it wasn't like anything I've ever felt before. Second, when Cathbad was about to leave, Neville gave him some kind of really, really rare plant. I heard Cathbad promise him one favor, of Neville's choosing, at a time and place of Neville's greatest need."

The first part, about the bonding, really didn't surprise Minerva all that much. Hermione had a tremendous amount of raw power and Harry's power was well....ridiculous. A boy who could take down over 100 dementors was pretty much off the charts. Easily in Dumbledore's class if not stronger, she thought.

The second revelation – about Neville – was a genuine surprise. Not just because of the nature of the gift, but because of Cathbad's gesture in return. "Are you sure of what the Arch-Druid said?" she asked the Minister for Magic.

Amelia nodded. "Quite sure. He was only six or seven feet from me and it was quiet otherwise, so I heard every word. I didn't see Augusta slip Neville the plant, but somehow she got it into his hand so that he could present it. It was very deftly done."

It was only a moment before Amelia started crying, as if out of the blue, and had to sit down. Minerva looked at her in horror. "What's wrong, Amelia?"

Between sobs, Amelia told her of finding Augusta, as well as the dozen Aurors, dead that the Longbottom Estate.

There was a horrible quiet that came over the room as the impact of the loss hit Minerva. Augusta had been a friend and confidant for as long as Minerva had been involved with the school...and that was a very long time. More, it had been Augusta herself who had taught her how to create stained glass windows, in every color imaginable, when she was young. She could still remember the first time Augusta had been willing to sign off on one of her projects and sell it at auction on her behalf. It had been an exhilarating feeling to see one of her pieces sell for that much and she still remembered with pride how her parents looked at her as Augusta gave her the huge bag of galleons.

The feeling of loss was overwhelming and she could barely contain her anger at Albus Dumbledore. She was sure that it was he or someone who worked for him directly that was responsible for Augusta's death, as well as the death of her two beautiful house-elves, Syboa and Dulcette.

"We will make him pay, Amelia."

"Make who pay, Minerva?"

"Albus" she said, bitterly, as she thought about the man who had betrayed her, in word and deed, over all the years she had known him.

Before Amelia could recover from hearing the bitter anger in Minerva's voice, a very, very angry Filius Flitwick handed her the scroll that he had just finished reading. "Read this, Amelia, and then try to tell me that we shouldn't burn him down where he stands."

She did. It took almost thirty minutes, where were passed in total silence, for her to read the entire document and then re-read two sections that she had found particularly hard to swallow. When she was finished, there was anger in her eyes the likes of which Filius hadn't seen since the first war against Riddle. Finally, she put the scroll down and looked at Minerva and the diminutive Charms professor. "So, what are we going to do about all of this?"

Minerva swiveled around in her chair so she could face her friend straight on. "I know what I have to do here. Hermione wrote that letter almost as soon as they landed wherever they are yesterday and they need whatever I can get to them. It's my life if I'm caught appropriating things from the school....but I don't think I have a choice. Since Harry's Lord Gryffindor, that nominally gives me cover to remove things that are considered 'his' property....but school records and the Book of Names are pretty clearly property of the school. Removing them signs my death warrant."

Amelia and Filius both jumped on that and said, almost at once, "Not if I can help it." They both smiled at their instinctive, simultaneous reaction – which did wonders to break the tension in the room.

Effortlessly transfiguring the chair that he was sitting on into a higher bar-stool, Filius changed positions so that he could look the two women more eye-to-eye.

Minerva held up five fingers and, folding a finger down as she ticked things off in order, said "The first thing we need to do is clean out Snape's private stores and get them packed away. After that, we should see if we can find the things that Hermione talked about being in the 'Come-and-Go room' on the seventh-floor. It might be better to just pack up everything that we find and send it all, so that they can sort through it thoroughly. Third, I have to at least make copies of all of the student records, so that Harry and Hermione can continue their recruitment efforts. Next year, whether I'm here or not, is going to see the lowest attendance that Hogwarts has ever recorded, thanks to them."

She stopped for a moment and looked at Amelia, whose expression clearly said that she was thinking about something and wanted to talk about it.

"What is it?" she said, seeing if she could elicit a reaction.

"Well, it occurs to me, since Susan is with Neville, it might be wise for me to vacate office as well. I can't see staying around and getting slaughtered with everyone else. If I left, Rufus would become Minister most likely, leaving one of his flunkies to take over his old job. I just found out before I came here today that Maria Edgecombe - who was over at the Floo Regulation department - has

disappeared. I assume, without knowing for certain, that she and her daughter Marietta left with Harry, Hermione, and the others."

Filius looked thoughtful, his brow as furrowed as it could be for someone with his lineage. "I think it's time for me to make my goodbyes to Hogwarts as well. If what Hermione said in her letter is true, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, and her speculations are accurate, then my services will soon not be needed. It pains me to say it, but I think that I should depart. My cousin will shelter me, as I know they always have a need for a Charms master."

Minerva looked at him and then nodded. "What about the rest? Septima and the others?"

"We have to get word to them as soon as possible and let them know that it's time to retire from the field, at least until such time as we're prepared to return and establish a new, fairer order here."

Amelia said, putting her hand on her head as she prepared to stand up, "Then we better get to it. None of us are strong enough to face Albus, either alone or together, and it would be better if we concluded our business and departed these shores....sooner rather than later."

It was a cold, hard realization and none of them liked it, but it was the lesser of two evils and each had a healthy sense of self-preservation. Immediately, Amelia called her two house-elves to her side and gave them the sad news – that it was time to pack their home and prepare to leave. Filius called two of the Hogwarts elves with whom he had established good relations and asked them to pack his entire apartment and prepare it for their departure.

The three stood and extended hands to each other. "It's time to declare where we stand, Minerva, Filius. I saw the winning side the day before yesterday and that's the side I want to be on. How we get there....I don't know....but I know that I don't want to be a victim of an inexorable pureblood takeover. Maybe in the short-term, my leaving will hasten that, but in the long term, I can do a lot more if I can pass on what I know to those who want to learn it and who will use it for the benefit of witches and wizards fairly, without regard to one's family history."

"Meet back here in two hours, then?" Filius asked.

"Yes, hopefully by then, we will be prepared to leave. We cannot afford to confront the Headmaster."

There were nods all around and two of the three departed the Deputy Headmistresses' office. She stayed behind to clean out all of the student records. She would have made copies and then destroyed the originals, but that would have left behind magical traces which might have been detected and used to track her after the fact.

She then set about destroying or disrupting the charms which protected the Book of Names. It was laborious work and took her the better part of an hour to achieve. Finally, though, she was able to remove the book without causing the original alarms to sound.

Once those two tasks were completed, she turned her attention to the more pressing matter: getting Severus Snape's lab, with all of his potions, preparations, and supplies, along with his personal notes boxed up and ready for transport.

She left her office and made her way down to the dungeon level and towards the former Potions-masters' office and private lab. Along the way, she had to overcome several of his automated lock-outs and protective charms. Some she disabled using her authority as the schools' Deputy Headmistress and the others she had to destroy or disable using direct, brute force.

Eventually, she made it past all of the protections and into his office. It was more orderly than she might have given the man credit for, based on her previous interactions with him. Good riddance, she thought, without remorse.

With several waves of his wand, the room was organized. Another created several large boxes, into which she sent all of the books, documents, binders, and bits of parchment. Once the job was done, she made her way towards the next room – Snape's personal lab.

There was none of the smell or disorganization that marked many other labs and she thought, grudgingly, that the very organization of the room was the reason that Snape had always been thought to be

one of the better potion-brewers in the UK. The lab was well stocked, items were neatly labeled and in their proper place .

Not having much to do with potions herself, except for the Animagus potion, which she had brewed a few times, she looked about and reasoned that there was no reason not to just take everything. She took a deep breath and then began the painstaking work of packing everything in the room. Some things, she knew, simply couldn't be packed with others, unless she wanted a fairly titanic explosion.

Twice she had to stop and re-arrange items in the boxes that were on the 'do-not-mix' list, but eventually she completed the task. It was an easy thing to then miniaturize everything and cart it all off to her office.

At the two-hour mark, the three reunited in her office to discuss what they had accomplished.

Amelia made a checklist and each compared his/her tasks against it. Minerva's work was done, as was Filius', while Amelia's had yet to be finished. She had been assigned to gather everything out of the room of requirement, but had been so overwhelmed with what she had found that she had completed only a portion of the work.

Laying out what she had discovered, Minerva's desk was covered. The Deputy Headmistress laughed as she listened to her friends' excitement.

Pointing at one particular item, she said "See! This axe was thought lost in 1367! Halfnor the Toothless owned it and then it was lost during the Goblin uprising that led to the battle of Prickles' Bridge. It's priceless. The Goblins will do anything to get it back.....including giving us one favor, no questions asked!"

Both Minerva and Filius began to understand what Amelia had taken so much time with her assignment. She pointed to another item, a small chalice. "This is a pensieve, though I'm not sure whom it belonged to. What I can tell you both though is that it is unlike anything I've seen before. The runes on the side are at least a thousand years older than any I've studied before. If Hermione got her hands on this, we'd lose her for days or weeks."

That caused Minerva to laugh again, as she thought about her protégé. It was true that Hermione would want to devote her every waking moment to solving the puzzle and she thought that in a more perfect world that she'd get to do just that. It was not a perfect world though and research for its own sake would have to wait until more the more pressing matters had been resolved.

There was one more item on the desk however that garnered their total and unequivocal attention. It was a small, gorgeous tiara, set with diamonds. Magic radiated off it and it felt palpably dark and dangerous.

Minerva looked at it and then several wheels turned in her head. Whipping around, she reached for the scroll which she had tucked into the inner pocket of her travelling cloak. Opening it, she quickly sang the activation phrase before skimming half-way down the multi-thousand word document. Finally, she stopped and read carefully; taking in several lines again and again before she extended one hand and pushed Amelia and Filius away from the desk and away from the tiara.

Rolling up the scroll and returning it to the pocket from whence it came, she said, "It's a Horcrux. It's Riddle's – Voldemort's - horcrux and it's got to be destroyed."

Both Amelia and Filius looked at her, somewhat amazed. She began explaining, even as she kept a wary eye on the unmoving tiara. "Remember what Hermione's letter said about that damn diary that Harry destroyed? The one that she said Harry thought Lucius Malfoy had given to Ginny Weasley at the beginning of her first year at Hogwarts? The diary that Harry ended up stabbing with the basilisk tooth? That was a horcrux. It was a part of Riddle's soul that he had 'broken off' and stored in the diary. I am dead certain that the tiara – the one you just found – is a horcrux as well. It has to be destroyed in order to help make Riddle mortal again."

She stopped and then said, "And you can't talk about this....ever. Either one of you. This is the information that Albus has been protecting all these years."

Filius spoke up, twirling his wand between his fingers as if he was dying to use it. "How many has he made?"

"The most powerful numbers are three and seven. If it were three he'd have left a piece in the tiara, another in the book, and one would remain in him. I'm betting that it's seven, though. That would allow him to spread them around and make it very, very difficult indeed to track them all down."

"I bet I know where another one is." Amelia said, surprised at herself.

Minerva looked at her, surprised. "Where?"

"Ollivander's. It's in his front window, in fact" she said, smirking.

"How can that be?"

"Ask Filius. He'll tell you" Amelia said, grinning at her friend.

"It's Helga Hufflepuff's wand."

A light went off in Minerva's head and she started laughing like mad. The other two looked at her, as if they were uncertain as to whether she had lost it. "You okay, Minnie?"

"Oh yes. Think about it. What items have we identified so far? Riddle's diary, Helga's wand, and Rowena Ravenclaw's tiara. What would that leave? It's likely, though I'm not positive of this, that Riddle focused either on Hogwarts-related things, founder-related items, or both. That reduces the list significantly. What items are at Hogwarts that fall into that category?"

For the next five minutes, they made a list of all the things that they knew for certain were logically related, a second list of those things that they thought they knew about, and a final list for those things that they speculated possibly existed. The first list had ten items on it. The second had six, and the third had two.

It was Filius who suggested asking the Hogwarts elves to help with the search. "There are over four hundred elves in the Castle and there's no reason not to have them help. They can go over the school quickly – probably in the next hour – and bring us anything they find."

Minerva nodded. "I'll call Charlus. He'll tell the rest what we're looking for and if it's here, they'll find it. We still need to go back to

the Come and go room and clean it out, but we can do that while the elves are searching. Once that's done though, I want us out of here. It's only two-thirty, but I don't want to even cut it close. We've got to be gone way before Albus gets anywhere the School."

"Agreed" Amelia said. "I still have to submit my letter of resignation and clean out my office. That will mean getting word to those who may want to join us BEFORE the Wizengamot gets wind of what we're doing."

"Charlus!" Minerva said out loud; hoping that the school's head-elf wasn't busy with other duties.

Pop! The head-elf, dressed in a traditional work-robe, with the Hogwarts' crest over the left breast, appeared suddenly. His ears were coated in a fine layer of graying hair and his fingers were somewhat gnarled, but he stood up straight and looked at the Deputy Headmistress with pride. "Yes, Mistress? What can I do for you?"

"Oh Charlus, thank you for coming. I know I've not seen you in a while, but it hasn't been for a lack of care."

"I understand, Mistress. Thank you for caring. Now, please tell me what I can do for you."

Minerva pointed to the tiara on the table. "Charlus, that tiara that you see on the desk is a very, very evil creation. It's a soul-container belonging to Voldemort. We believe that there may be another in the school....possibly more. I know that you and your brethren know the Castle better than anyone else, except for the Weasley Twins. Can you feel the magic around that tiara and then go and teach it to the others, so that they can help with the search? I want them all to know what they are looking for."

He looked at her, even as his ears folded back. Minerva could tell from his expression that he was afraid and that what she had just asked him to do was no mean feat. "I'm not liking this, Mistress. That's a dangerous thing that you've asked."

"Can you at least teach your brethren how to look for them and have any elf who finds one come back and tell us where it is, so that we can come get it and dispose of it?"

Charlus thought about that and then said, "Yes, we can do that, Mistress. That is bad, bad magic. The other elves will not be wanting to touch such a thing. Especially if it's from he-who-must-not-be-named."

Minerva frowned. Whenever a Hogwarts elf slipped into the traditional elvish patois, she knew that the elf in question was afraid. Charlus hadn't done it in front of her in years.

"Charlus, I know it's dangerous, but it's got to be done. For what it's worth, I'm leaving as of today. It's unlikely that I will ever return to the school. If I've ever needed a favor, it's now."

The tall-ish elf's eyes went very wide and started to leak tears. It caused Minerva to choke up a bit with the unexpected emotion of having to say goodbye to someone she had known for more than fifty-five years. "One more thing. I have to enforce your loyalty oaths, Charlus. I'm afraid that the Headmaster has become a bad, bad man as well and I have to get away before I'm killed. Many of the students whom you know won't be returning either." She hated doing it, but she had never asked it of them before.

A white glow came over the elf and he looked at her, as if relieved of some kind of burden. "We'll do it, Mistress."

She reached out and caressed his head gently. "Thank you, Charlus. If any elf finds something, we'll be in the Come and Go room on the seventh floor. Please tell the other elves that they can go there and find us and we'll go wherever we have to in order to remove the cursed object."

She was taking a risk, she knew, by involving all of the elves of the school, but it was worth it. Nominally, at least, the elves were loyal to HER, because she was administrative head of the school, while Albus was the titular head. The difference lay in the fact that HE had the ability to hire and fire the HUMAN (or at least part-human) staff and discipline the students, while she dealt with the finances and the overall functioning of the school. The fact that Albus used the elves as an extension of his information-gathering network inside the school was beside the point. She had never invoked the elves' oaths of loyalty before and it pained her to do it as her very last act, but she knew her choices were limited.

Minerva, Filius, and Amelia all watched as Charlus put his hands over, but not on, the cursed tiara. A black cloud formed around it, enveloping it for a moment, so that none of them could see it. Once the elf withdrew, the cloud faded and the tiara was visible again. Charlus looked at them with haunted eyes. "Bad, bad magic, Mistress. The sooner it's gone, the safer all will be."

"I know, Charlus. Go now, and do me this one last favor."

"Goodbye, Mistress....We will always miss you."

She wanted to say something more; anything, really, to express how much she had grown to care about Charlus and the others who had taken care of her and had seen to her daily needs each and every day that she had ever served at Hogwarts, but she found that she couldn't. It was too hard.

Amelia saw the hurt in her friends' eyes and reached out to give her the hug that was so obviously needed. They stood, embracing, for at least a minute before separating. Minerva dabbed at the tears running down her cheeks before standing up straighter and saying, "Alright. If I'm going to leave Hogwarts, I might as well do the thing properly. Can you two go to the Come and Go room and get it all boxed up? If we're going to cripple Albus' ability to fight back, we might as well do it right. I'm going to make a detour into the library and relieve the school of its restricted section."

Amelia blanched at that; causing the Deputy Headmistress to look at her quizzically. "What? We'll take better care of it than the hellions here, for sure, and we'll put it to better use as well. Besides, if it forces the Board of Governors to close the school down, it's a step in the right direction. It will make the purebloods send their children out of country for their education – and anywhere that they might go, Albus Dumbledore won't be in charge."

Filius said, "I'd not have thought of that, Minnie, but you're probably right. It would definitely slow them down at the Ministry as well, because they'd not have a school of their own to try to dominate."

"We're agreed then?"

The Minister for Magic nodded, as did Filius.

"Good. We'll meet back here at three-thirty. That's when we leave, ok? We can't afford to prolong this."

With that, the three went their separate ways. Minnie headed up one flight of stairs to the main doors of the library, while Amelia and Filius trudged back up the seven flights of stairs to the top floor. As they went, all three were muttering about the amount of work facing him/her and about the frustrations brought on by having to deal with dark lords, incompetent Ministries, and pureblood bigots.

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A half-hour later, a small elf named Texa – who had been assigned to check the awards cases in the display hall – found the third horcrux. Knowing that she was not allowed to touch it under any circumstances, fled the room and went straight to the seventh floor and the 'Come and Go' room, where she had been told humans would be waiting to hear any news.

Filius Flitwick followed the animated young elf back down five flights of stairs, to the display hall, where she pointed out the display case that held a silver cup, which rested on a plinth that read, "To Thomas M. Riddle, Head Boy, for exceptional services to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry" It was dated, October 31, 1944.

Carefully, Filius opened the case and then promptly stopped. "We need a strong, hard wooden box. Can you go and retrieve one for me, or just bring me some wood and I'll make one?"

Texa considered his request for a moment and then disappeared. Two minutes later, she returned with a perfectly-sized, hard oak box. Filius then moved around to the other side of the box which lay on the ground, waiting, so that he could use his dominant hand while casting. He deftly magicked the cup out and into the waiting box; sealing it shut with the best and most powerful locking charms and wards that he knew.

Hugging the elf with his good arm in thanks for what she had done before she popped away, he levitated the crate in front of him and made his way back to Minerva's office.

Minerva was having a much less good time of it, as was expected. There were just some books in the library that didn't want to leave and she was having a hard time breaking the wards which prevented their safe removal. She was about to give up when the Gray Lady herself floated into the library through a side wall.

"Going somewhere, Deputy Headmistress" She asked.

"Yes, Lady Ravenclaw, I am. It saddens me, but I am."

"And why does it sadden you, Minerva?"

Tears were becoming something of a habit, Minerva thought, as she tried to wipe away the new crop that had started to form at the corners of her eyes. "Because I fear I shall never return, my Lady. This has been my home for fifty-five years and this is not how I would have arranged my departure, if I could have had my wish."

"And where would you go, that you need all of these books?" She pointed to the stacks of books that stood all around Minerva.

"I'm going to follow Harry Potter and his wife, Hermione. They have fled overseas somewhere, and I will go to them, so that they can organize and plan and train for the day when we will return to these shores and take back the school and defeat the one who calls himself 'Lord Voldemort'."

The Gray Lady seemed to consider what the lady in tartan standing before her had said before she made her decision to act.

"Don't fret, Deputy Headmistress. Helga and I have watched you for all the years that you've been here and we've also watched Mrs. Potter. She's truly loyal to this school and to you, and for that, she has our support."

"You'll help me, then?"

"Aye, daughter, we will. You've proven yourself to us over and over again and now it's time that we acted, instead of watched. Harry has a destiny to fulfill and he can't do it without your help and the information that's in these books."

Minerva smiled a sad smile and said, more to herself than to the ghostly lady in front of her, "So much on someone so young."

"And there will be more, daughter. But now is not the time to dwell on that. Here's what you need to do to remove the books."

Taking out her own ghostly wand, she taught the Deputy Headmistress the proper wand movements and the long, Gaelic charm that would unlock control over all the books. When she was satisfied that Minerva could properly cast the charm, she stood by her and said, "Go ahead now, dearest. You can do it."

Shaking her head, Minerva McGonagall thought back to the last time that someone had used that phrase with her and remembered that it was in her sixth year, when she was preparing to cast a particularly difficult charm that would bind ward stones together in sets, for use in protecting buildings. It seemed like a very, very long time ago indeed.

Lifting her wand, she thought about the intent of the charm and about the wording and then simply let it flow out of her. The bolt of magic hit the stacks of books; washing over and around them, until all the books from the restricted section were engulfed by it. Some glowed white while others pulsed with darker colors. She could feel the charm working, even as the moments ticked away. Finally, one book screamed – a loud, piercing scream - then went silent.

"Very good, Deputy Headmistress" the ghostly Lady Ravenclaw said. "It's a shame you weren't sorted into my house. You would have done wonderfully."

"Aye, she would have, Rowena" said a voice from behind them both. "But she was sorted into my house instead. I can't say that I've ever been prouder of a McGonagall than I am of you, dearest daughter."

A ghostly man stepped out from behind a bookcase and looked at the two of them. He was tall – or at least he would have been in life – and he sported a closely-cropped goatee. On each wrist, there was a bracer and at his hip, a long, bejeweled sword. Minerva smiled, even as she fell to one knee. "My Lord Gryffindor."

"Rise, daughter of my heart" he said kindly as he approached the two.

Minerva rose and took in the full specter of the man into whose house she had been sorted when she was but a little girl. It was awe-inspiring. From the tails found in Hogwarts: A History, she knew that only a few people, during the thousand years since the schools' founding, had ever seen Gryffindor's ghost and only one person had ever talked to him – Nicolas Flamel.

"Why me, my Lord?" she said, in a small, almost timid voice. "Why now, when I'm about to leave and not return?"

"Because my heirs have been named, my daughter, and I need you to tell them some things for me."

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4:19 PM, in the Office of the Deputy Headmistress

Three-thirty became Four PM. and both Filius and Amelia were getting nervous. At Four-fifteen, they agreed to give Minerva a few extra minutes; hoping that they'd not have to go and find her.

At Four Nineteen, Minerva walked in, looking visibly shaken. Amelia quickly made her way over to the Deputy Headmistress and helped her to a chair. Filius conjured a glass of water and pressed it into one of Minerva's free hands and then pushed the glass towards her face.

"Drink. You'll feel better."

Minerva did so, and then faced them both. She was having a hard time deciding what to tell them first.

What came to mind was the book collection. She withdrew it from a pocket. It was a square, four inches by four inches. "Got them all."

"Really?" the Charms professor said, in a somewhat squeaky voice.

"Yes. Lady Ravenclaw helped me."

"The Gray Lady? She spoke to you? How can that be?" Amelia's interest was genuine. She had heard from Susan (who talked to Padma Patil) all about the half-dozen times that the ghostly Lady

Ravenclaw had been spotted in the castle. Each time coincided with a celebration in honor of something that a person from Ravenclaw house had done that was exceptionally brilliant. It was considered to be the greatest honor possible to gain the attention of Lady Ravenclaw herself and it motivated everyone in the house to work to his/her highest potential.

"She's been watching me all these years" Minerva told them, quietly. "I made her proud, she said."

If Amelia had been her nieces' age, Minerva's revelation would surely have earned her an "Awwwwwwwwwwwwww! That's so sweet!"...but it didn't. Instead, Amelia said simply, "You're very lucky, Minnie. I was here for seven years and never, ever saw Helga Hufflepuff; even though I did everything I could to work hard, play fair, and be loyal and good to those around me."

The conversation might have gone on for hours, but clock in the corner struck the half-hour and Minerva said, "It's time to go."

Not wanting to use the floo or to do anything that might leave a trace, the three made their way down the stairs from her now barren, sterile office. She locked the door and then deliberately cut her hand, so that she could inscribe the door with a blood-ward.

She coated the tip of her wand with the blood from the palm of her left hand and set to work writing the locking glyph, then the warning glyph, and finally, the punishment glyph. When she was finished, she cleaned her wand and healed the deep cut which had allowed the blood to flow freely.

Turning, she took Amelia's arm for moral support and together, the three made their way out the great doors of the school and towards the Forbidden Forest and the edge of the school's wards. As sad as it was for each, not one of them looked back.

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

From Chapter four – "Bombshells and Bindings"

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Just after nightfall, June 21, 1995, near the Office of the Headmaster

Two things could be said for the hallways that led to the Headmasters' office: when students were not around, they were cold and dark at night and no amount of torchlight was ever able to brighten them sufficiently that they could be considered 'hospitable'.

If the person traversing the hallway was tired after a day made long by the in-fighting that was the hallmark of the Wizengamot and introspective because of the multiple ways in which his plans-within-plans seemed to have failed, they were just that much more gloomy.

The stone gargoyles that guarded the entrance to the Headmaster's office sprang aside without a sound as he approached, which was good, given his already darkened mood.

As he laid down his travelling cloak and thought again about the loss of his potions-master, Albus Dumbledore began to consider whether what was happening around him was because of Harry Potter's own efforts or because of the help that others were providing. The

thought that others were helping him was worrisome, because it might give the boy courage and confidence that he would not, alone, possess. Albus had seen to that.

He smiled as he thought about the subtle and invisible glyphs that he had etched into the wardstones which had 'protected' No. 4, Privet Drive. Glyphs of anger; glyphs of loathing, glyphs of fear, and glyphs of jealousy; each acting in concert with the others to cause the maximum amount of animosity in Harry's Muggle relatives towards him and his heritage. Every year, they were renewed by Harry's presence, unannounced to anyone save himself and his former potions-master. It had been some of his best work, he thought and all 'for the greater good'.

There was only one person who had the ability and the perceptiveness to see past the defenses that he had placed on the wardstones: Minerva McGonagall...and she was loyal to Hogwarts he believed, if not to the Headmaster himself, and couldn't do anything that would directly interfere with the Headmaster's will for one of the school's most renowned pupils. That he was wrong in that assumption was only one of the areas where Albus Dumbledore had erred.

Walking over to the floo, Dumbledore tossed a handful of his special floo-powder in and smiled as the bright yellow-green flames kicked up. Placing his head into the mystical fire, he called out, "Minerva!"

Withdrawing his head, he waited for her response. Two minutes went by and nothing happened. He repeated his fire-call and again, there was no response. Finally, he grew frustrated with her apparent inattentiveness to his call and decided to visit her in her office. It was not so late at night that she would not still be there.

Deciding that it was quicker (and easier) to walk there than it was to rouse his sleeping Phoenix, Dumbledore made his way back down his spiral staircase and then down the long, darkened hallway towards the Deputy Headmistresses' office.

The two, carved-stone Gryffindor Lions didn't spring apart as they always had at his presence. "Open" he said gruffly. Nothing. "Open, damn it!" Nothing again.

Realizing that something was very wrong, Dumbledore withdrew the back-up wand that he was forced to carry and pointed it at the doors; intending to blast them apart. His silent 'Reducto' slammed into the doors...and rebounded right back at him, missing the center of his chest only because of his honed reflexes. However, he did not get away unscathed. His poorly considered spell-choice left a massive hole in his upper left arm, which began to bleed profusely. "Fawkes!" he cried out in pain, "Help me!"

Somehow, the mystic fire-bird heard his call and came to his rescue. Landing so that he could grab the Phoenixes' tail-feathers, Fawkes disappeared with the same blinding fire...only this time, with a passenger in tow; bound for the school's hospital wing and the merciful talents of Madame Pomfrey.

Neither Dumbledore nor Fawkes saw the magical glow of the Glyph of Punishment that began to burn angrily in the very center of the doorway; with the same red color as the blood that created it.

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Office of the Minister for Magic, about that same time, June 21, 1995

Minerva McGonagall was looking at her long-time friend over the rim of a tall, almost 'masculine' tea-cup as Amelia packed her office and prepared to leave the post that she had so recently been elected to when she felt the first concussive wave of magical rebound hit her. It was as if she had just been pounded with a huge mallet; so strong was the force of the magical shock-wave.

Her tea somehow, miraculously, avoided being spilled all over her lap as she rode out the concussive effects of what had to have been Dumbledore's efforts to get into her office.

When she was sufficiently recovered, she said, "I think Albus just tried to blast his way into my office and got his due in return. He must have used one hell of a spell, because I could feel the rebound of it just now."

Amelia stopped what she was doing and looked at her friend of over thirty-five years. "Guess that means we're about to run out of time, eh?"

"Your guess is as good as mine, Amelia, but if I had to.....yes. I think that's about right. I figure we have maybe an hour, no more."

"Then help me get this done. All these records you see?" she pointed to the stacks of papers and parchments on the left-hand side of her desk, "Are bits of evidence that I've collected since I've worked for the Ministry. They are records of bribes, extortions, embezzlements, and every other kind of underhanded dealing that you can imagine. I've been slowly working my way through them, trying to put together cases sufficiently air-tight that I could go after those who walked away after the last time Riddle was 'defeated'. I have the names of pretty much every death eater and every sympathizer to Riddle's cause. The awful thing is that most all of them work for the Ministry itself in one capacity or another."

"You mean?"

"Yes, I do, Minnie. When I leave, they are going to own the Ministry. Not immediately, but pretty quickly. Within a year, every department will be run by a death eater, a former death eater, or a pure-blood sympathizer. It will be impossible to prevent Riddle's take over. If we want our country back, it will mean having to tear down the entire edifice and re-build the government. That's what we're facing."

Minerva was horrified, but unsurprised by the revelation. "Time to get out then and go where they'll have a harder time reaching us."

"Got that right. While you were contacting your colleagues, I sent patroni to all of those who I know are loyal still and I expect that by tomorrow afternoon, Wizarding Britain will be short several thousand witches and wizards."

"Ditto. I just hope that those who want to get out can do so. I know that our friends in MI 5 & $\frac{3}{4}$ will do what they can to help, but it's asking them for a huge, huge favor."

"Not if they want all of that talent and power to return some day. It's an investment and they know it. Besides, it's pretty obvious that all of the magical advances that have happened over the last two hundred years – those few that there have been – have all been because of Muggle-born students or 'half-bloods' like us. The pure-bloods are completely in the dark about the reality of having only 'their people' to govern."

"Thank Merlin I got the book"

"Got that right, Minnie. Without that, we'd be lost. We've got to make that a priority for getting out of the country."

"Don't you worry about that. I've already booked passage on a fast clipper-ship that's leaving from...."

"Don't tell me, Minnie. If I'm captured, I don't want to know. You just do what you have to do. I'll send my Patronus to find you, once we're safely out of the country."

"That's good. Let's get you packed and then we can leave. I still want to make one stop before we leave."

"Gringotts?" the Minister asked, curious about what her friend needed to do.

Minerva grinned. "No. Harrods. I figure that if I'm not coming back for a long while, I ought to have a supply of tea laid in."

For all of the tension that the two powerful witches had been feeling, the laughter that the ex-Deputy Headmistress' comment brought was genuinely appreciated.

When she had recovered from the spasmodic laughter that her friend had caused, Amelia Bones said, "You are a scoundrel, Minnie...and I love you for it. Only you would think of Tea at a time like this."

Minerva's response was a very lady-like raspberry, blown in her friends' direction.

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Once they were done and the room was barren, Amelia Marie Bones took a blank piece of parchment and wrote out her resignation statement. It was three lines long.

Rolling it up, she magically sealed it and then attached petite pair of magical, golden wings that were used exclusively within the Ministry itself to deliver bits of parchment from one department to another.

She tapped the wings once with her wand and the scroll lifted gently into the air and then disappeared with a 'pop!'.

"Done. Let's get out of here before the contents are read. We'll never make it, otherwise."

Amelia led her friend down a long corridor and out into a private atrium. There were two lifts waiting. "Private lift" she said, walking into the one on the right. She pushed the button which caused the lift to begin its ascent to the Muggle street above the Ministry offices.

Once they were safely above ground, Amelia threw her arms around her friend and said quietly, "Love you. Take care of yourself and signal me once you're safe, ok?"

"You too, Amelia. You've always been one of my best girls."

They squeezed each other once more and then stood back. Amelia disappeared first and then, with a saddened heart, Minerva followed.

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"It was a close call, Albus. I got you patched up, but you got lucky. Luckier, certainly, than young Mr. Potter did at times."

Albus smiled his best, most sympathetic smile. "Thanks, Poppy. I owe you one."

"Yes, you do, Albus. I would have been half way to Amalfi, if Fawkes hadn't found me and brought me back. You're damn lucky. You want to tell me why you had a massive, burning hole in your shoulder?"

"Another in a long series of rash misjudgments, I'm afraid, Poppy. I grew impatient and wasn't expecting a door here in my school to be warded against attack."

There wasn't much humor in her voice when she said, "Then you're a damn fool, Albus. You should know better than to go around blasting things without thinking things through first. Next time, who knows where I might be. You're running out of lives, Albus. Remember that."

The Headmaster slowly got to his feet and moved his now undamaged shoulder up and down and felt the residual soreness from where the Skele-grow and blood-replenishment potions had done their work. He was determined to learn the secret behind the door that wouldn't open before he retired for the night.

"Thank you, Poppy. I assure you, I won't be back....at least not until my annual, ok?"

"Yes, you do that, Albus, or next time, I'll heal you using Muggle techniques and you'll be laid up for weeks instead of hours."

He could hear from her tone of voice that she meant every word of her threat. "Yes, Poppy, I promise, I'll be good" was all he could say. As a healer, she was better than top-rate...and both he and the school needed her, so he had little, if any chance, of winning the argument.

The conversation ended, Albus Dumbledore made his way out of the Hospital wing and back towards Minerva McGonagall's office door; determined to figure out what had caused his Reducto to come shooting back at him.

It didn't take long to discover the glyphs that the transfiguration professor and Deputy Headmistress had left behind, even if their discovery was a rude and unwelcome surprise.

Two hours, and a great deal of cursing later, Dumbledore finally overcame the powerful magics that had sealed and guarded the door to Minerva McGonagall's office. What the Headmaster found inside....or rather, what he didn't find inside infuriated him even more. That led to yet another round of swearing – this time in Gaelic, German, and Russian. At the end, after finding that the office had indeed been cleaned out; including all of the student records and much more importantly, the Book of Names, the Supreme Mugwump of the Wizengamot left the office, determined to cause his former colleague as many problems as she had just caused him.

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Knockturn Alley, thirty minutes later

Most people didn't enter the dingy lower part of Knockturn Alley during the day and even fewer entered it at night. More, it was the kind of place where someone didn't go shopping for anything that could 'do a body good'.

The few women who could be found in the Alley after dark were not those to whom society had been gentle. Some were runaways who had been taken in by the predators; promised a warm bed and good food, and then exploited for their few physical charms that they might possess. It was no different than what happened in the Muggle world – just less talked about, because of those 'purebloods' who denied that such things existed or happened in their 'superior' world.

Others were in the Alley because that's where their 'pushers' were or worse, their owners. Slavery was still a reality in magical society; hundreds of years after it had been done away with in Muggle Britain.

Albus Dumbledore, his cloak pulled tightly about him, moved down the Alley without ever being seen. He was in search of one particular individual and he hoped that the man (though the term was used loosely) was not permanently indisposed. He knew that being a bounty-hunter who specialized in vampires and other hard-to-kill magical creatures did absolutely nothing positive for one's longevity.

Praying that his instincts were correct, the aged Headmaster took a right and went down an even dingier side-alley and up a narrow flight of stairs that were barely lighted. The dank, ammonia smell of urine was heavy in the air and there was an almost overpowering sense of malicious magic all around. He clutched his wand and hoped that he didn't run into a situation that required that he fight his way out.

When he reached the landing for the third floor, he was met by a locked door on which was inscribed a series of runic symbols. Having dealt with such traps in his early years, he knew that he had to touch his wand-tip to them in precisely the right order or bad things could happen. Given the fact that he was standing on a rickety metal platform that was no more than 6 x 8 feet, he knew that there was no room for error.

There were five symbols/glyphs altogether, arranged in rough cross-pattern. The first symbol, at the center, stood for light or heat, while

the symbol below it represented the moon or darkness. The top one represented hope and the one on the far left represented closure. The fifth one, the one that completed the cross on the right-hand side, represented birth, life, or beginnings, depending on how it was used. Without context, it was impossible to tell.

For more than twenty-five minutes, Dumbledore looked at the puzzle; trying to sort through all of the possible combinations. There were one hundred twenty possible combinations, but he knew that at least half didn't make any sense at all. That brought the number that he had to consider down to about sixty or so. He was able to discount a dozen more when he remembered that in ward-building, polar-opposites cannot be placed side-by-side. That brought his number of possible combinations down to forty-eight. Of those, he thought that about half didn't make much sense, because they placed the glyphs for moon and closure side-by-side. Out of context, that might have been fine, but not when they came at the beginning of a glyph/ward sequence.

His deductions brought his number of combinations down to twenty-four. That was a manageable number he thought. Taking out a piece of parchment, he copied the glyphs onto the parchment and then used a quick bit of magic to animate them. Once they were animated, he began arranging them into the twenty-four possible sequences; discarding the ones that he knew wouldn't work. He finally reduced the number of possible choices to three. Of those three though, he was truly unsure which would make the best choice: hope-heat-birth-moon-closure, heat-hope-birth-moon-closure, or heat-birth-hope-moon-closure? It took him a while to settle on his choice, but once he did, he put the others out of his mind and stepped forward confidently. Touching the tip of his wand to the glyphs heat-birth-hope-moon-closure, he stepped back and waited for something to happen.

He smiled as he watched the door melt away; revealing a well-lit passageway. Sometimes, he thought, it's what's logical that matters. I wonder how many wizards really know that?

The irony of Dumbledore's appreciation for logic was lost on him, even as he entered the passageway and began to focus on the task at hand.

Thirty minutes later, after pleasantries and drinks for 'old times' sake' had been exchanged, the two men got down to business.

"You're sure you can do this, Merced?" the Headmaster asked, quietly clutching the bag of galleons that he had in his travelling cloak. He wasn't sure how much the bounty-hunter's services were going to cost him, but he knew that whatever the man asked, he'd probably pay it. He had to get the Book of Names back at any cost...and he was not averse to getting rid of the pesky Scottish woman at the same time, given what she had done to him. Merced was a vicious killer with no sense of remorse or pity, which made him perfect for the job that Albus needed done.

"I'm sure, Albus. She'll not get away from me, no matter where she's gone. If she's in the country or anywhere in Europe or Asia, I'll find her. She can run but she cannot hide."

"Good. That's what I needed to hear."

He got up to take his leave, but was stopped by the tip of a wand on his arm. "Aren't you forgetting something, Albus?"

The Headmaster sighed. He had hoped to get away without paying the notorious bounty-hunter up front; thinking that the man would have better incentive if he was forced to collect his reward after the deed was done. "No, my friend. It's been a long day and I'm tired. Forgive me."

Reaching down into his travelling cloak, he drew out the small, black, leather bag with the Gringotts' seal on it. "Five hundred galleons for your efforts, Merced. If you need more, I think I can be persuaded, provided you show me that the deeds are done and that the money is justified."

Merced smiled a wry smile. "I'm hurt, Albus! When have I ever failed you before?"

Albus looked at him, taking in his measure, before slumping a little bit against the frame of the small room's only door. "Never, of course, but you've never tracked anyone like this woman before either, my friend, and I want to make sure that the deed is truly done. I have to have that book back....and in one, unscathed piece."

Inside, Merced was more than a little shocked by the Headmaster's condition. He had never seen him so truly tired and worn down before. He wondered what had happened to bring the powerful wizard almost to the point of physical collapse.

"You'll have it, Albus. I take pride in my work, just like you."

The old man nodded. "Good then. Go. Find her and get the book. If you have to dispose of her to get it, do so. I'll not miss her much, even if she was competent as the school's Governess. That damn brogue of hers got on my nerves." He didn't mention that Minerva never did see eye-to-eye with his need to achieve the 'greater good' and gave him nothing but grief and complaints every time he tried to steer Harry in a direction that would make him more 'manageable'. Harry's relationship with the mudblood, Granger, was one of those areas. Minerva had resisted his every effort to put Harry together with the youngest Weasley, so that the 'purebloods' who hadn't come out in open support of Riddle would be swayed to his side. She even had had the audacity to tell him to go fuck himself several times when he had told her that she didn't have a choice in the matter, her contract with the Board of Governors be damned.

He would have used the Imperious curse on her, to make her go along with his wishes, if he had felt like he could have maintained it. He had never felt confident about his ability to do it though, so he never tried. Worse, the damnable woman even had the nerve to wear an unbreakable pendant that protected her against every manner of memory modification, including all of the potions-based ones.

Those, and other thoughts, plagued him as he saw himself out of the man's lair and back out through the darkened, forbidding alley and towards the safe disappearance point near where Knockturn Alley intersected with Diagon Alley.

Tired as he was, his pride kept him from calling his familiar and asking him to come and bear him home, even though it was what he desperately wanted to do.

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Two hundred miles off the coast of England, along the southern boat route to the United States, after moonrise, June 22, 1995

This is the life that I should have had, Minerva thought to herself, as she sat on the boat's foredeck and drank deeply from her Godiva-infused hot coffee. The stars were out and she could see Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, as well as the constellation of Hercules. Others were visible, but she couldn't remember their names.

She was far enough away from England that she knew that she was now relatively safe. She was beyond the maximum apparition-distance for most witches and wizards and with every passing hour, she was another twenty miles closer to the interlocking and overlapping wards that protected the United States and both its Muggle as well as magical citizens.

Lifting the deliciously warm mug of coffee to her lips, Minerva thought back to the day when she first saw the love between Harry and Hermione that would eventually blossom into marriage.

Flashback: Just before the first event of the Tri-wizard Tournament.

Concerned as she was about the unreasonable, forced, dangerous participation of her young lion in the Tournament, Minerva McGonagall followed Hermione Granger, as the young girl surreptitiously made her way towards the tent where the Tournament participants were waiting for the first event to start.

She hadn't yet done anything that violated the rules, but Minerva couldn't put it past anyone to be tempted to intervene, for any of the competitors. That meant that despite her horror at seeing her god-son forced to participate, she had to uphold both the school's rules as well as the rules of the Tournament.

Minerva watched as Hermione made her way towards the back of the tent and the shadows overtook her. She didn't see the hastily cast disillusionment spell, nor did she realize immediately that she has completely lost track of the girls' whereabouts.

Stepping inside the tent, Minerva surveyed the competitors; trying to see if her young lioness had somehow found a way to get inside. Seeing no one that shouldn't be in the tent, Minerva slipped out again and waited.

What she didn't hear was Hermione's desperate plea to Harry to let her in through the back flap of the tent, which someone had carelessly left undone. "Harry!" Hermione cried in a strangled voice.

"Hermione? Is that you?"

"Let me in!"

Harry did, pushing the flap aside and standing out of the way so that his very best friend could slip in. When she did, Harry did the unexpected thing and immediately embraced her; not wanting to wait to hold her. "I need to tell you something, Hermione....before I go." he said, as he buried his face in the nape of her neck.

Hugging him tighter, Hermione whispered back, "What is it, Harry?"

"I love you, Hermione."

It was at that moment that Minerva ducked back into the tent, to see if her young charge was still alone. Victor Krum had seen everything and for Minerva's benefit, he flicked his eyes in the general direction of the couple in the corner. She smiled as she turned and saw her two favorite students kiss for the very first time and jumped for joy inside when she heard Hermione say, "I love you too, Harry."

It was at that moment that Rita Skeeter's photographer, who must have entered the tent behind her, took his infamous photograph and Rita said, "Ah, young love!"

- Flashback ends -

Minerva wished, not for the first time, that she had had the presence of mind to destroy that camera and personally escort Rita off the school grounds. However, she was more concerned about her two young lions, having just witnessed their first declarations of love for each other.

As she leaned back into the amazingly comfortable lounge-chair, she thought about the horror that was Harry's first task: getting past a clutching female Hungarian Horntail. She knew that under no circumstances could she have done it, save by use of the most extreme spells and battle-magics and to have been forced to watch her adopted godson battle the enormous creature was punishment

aplenty, she was sure, for whatever sins she might have committed in previous lives.

Minerva was just drifting off to sleep when a glowing creature came racing across the water, angling to meet the boat as it made its silent way west. The presence of the magic eventually woke her and she sat up. As she did, the Patronus – an overly-large, silvery English hedgehog – just about bounded onto the deck. Though she had never seen it before, she knew that only one person could have produced this particular Patronus: Amelia Bones.

Minerva reached out to touch the miraculous creature and as she did so, the message it carried instantly made its way into her mind. "Safe and sound for the moment. Gone to our favorite summer retreat. Message me when you reach your first stop. I'll be waiting. Love, Amelia."

She smiled as she thought about their favorite summer retreat. It was La Dolce Vita du Cote d'Azur – a five-star, extremely exclusive resort that had, as a part of its services, an entire group of rooms that were held open for magical guests. The man who actually ran and owned the La Dolce Vita hotel group was a Hogwarts graduate; class of 1897. Minerva had never met him, but she always received a personal note from him whenever she and Amelia checked into the hotel for their annual summer vacation.

The temptation to message her back was strong, but she resisted, because the time was too soon. She wasn't quite far enough away from England, she knew, to make her entirely safe. Once she made land-fall in Boston, she knew she'd be safe to send her Patronus. Six or seven more days, depending on the strength of the east-bound currents, to do nothing but read, sleep, listen to Muggle radio stations, and eat: all for the equivalent of about 250 galleons (\$2500 USD). All in all, not a bad life, even if she had sacrificed a very, very great deal over the years to be in a position to enjoy it.

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1:45 pm, June 29, 1995, on the Plains of Abraham, looking west over the St. James River

The sun was shining; the sky was robins-egg blue, and breeze....glorious. Harry Potter was a very, very happy young man

as he sat on the blanket next to his beloved wife and very best friend, Hermione Potter née Granger.

They had been in Quebec City for just less than four days and already, Harry didn't want to, nor could not be made to leave. It was truly a fabulous city.

Beside them sat lunch, such as it was: A warm, crusty baguette from the Patisserie St. Albert on Rue Marie-Louise, a bottle of white wine ("Vidal") from the Domaine St-Jacques winery, a good-sized wedge of brie, also from a local farm, and a box overfull with locally-grown strawberries. Harry had been content to let Hermione loose to pick out the goodies and when she had returned, he knew that he had been right to do so. As Harry bit off a chunk of the baguette upon which he had liberally spread some of the Brie, he said silently, "You were right to bring us here, love. It's perfect."

"Think so?"

"Yes, I do, love. The Headmaster will dick around looking for us in the States and won't think to look her, except as a last resort, and only after he's scoured Europe. That's going to take him months to do, if not a year. By then, we'll be solidly entrenched here and will have just disappeared into thin air."

"That's what I hope too, Harry" she said silently, as she poured a glass of wine for herself and then took a sip. It was nicely chilled, thanks to the cooling charm that she had discreetly applied earlier.

"Pour a half for me?" Harry asked her, pointing at the other goblet that lay in the picnic basket.

She did so and then handed it to him. Immediately, Harry learned two things: (1) White wine goes very well indeed with French bread and cheese, and (2) there is something inherently romantic about sharing a classically French picnic with the person whom you love the most. If it were possible to feel one's heart swell with love, it is what Harry would have experienced, as he looked at the young woman who had always and forever been prepared to sacrifice everything in order to protect him.

"I love you, Hermione, more than I can tell."

As she leaned towards him for the kiss that she knew they both wanted, she said in his mind, "You don't have to, Harry. I know. I can feel it. I love you too."

There are some times when mother-nature just can't help but cooperate. This was one of those. The staggering brightness of the Nimbus Lumens Amor – the 'light of love' that all truly bonded couples exhibited to one degree or another – was outshone by the very bright sunshine of the perfect mid-summers' day....masking it perfectly and therefore completely hiding the fact that Hermione and Harry Potter were not your ordinary couple in love.

Further down the Plain, on a blanket of their own, Sirius Black sat next to Septima Vector – Hogwarts' now former Arithmancy professor. They were watching out for Harry and Hermione, so that the young couple could enjoy some time together without fear of either Dumbledore's or Voldemort's agents ruining their day. Septima had found them four days previously, to Sirius' delight, and she had happily agreed to take on the job of protecting Harry as at least a part-time responsibility. That she found Sirius Black charming, handsome, and interesting was of course completely beside the point.

Septima leaned over to Sirius and said, "You don't suppose we're just being paranoid, do you?"

He looked at her and then sadly shook her head. "Even if we are, it's better to be safe than sorry. Snape tried to use an Unforgiveable on me without cause and probably would have tried to kill me if he had had more time. If Dumbledore's willing to condone that, then anything is on the table with him. We can't take that chance. We are going to have to return to England eventually and clean up the mess. Harry is key to our success – at least when it comes to dealing with Voldemort."

She looked at him quizzically. "How's that?"

"Prophecy"

Her singular arched eyebrow made him laugh.

"Yea. Really. It was made, believe it or not, by Sybil Trelawney, the night that Dumbledore first went to interview her for the post of Divination Professor."

"And?" she asked, expectant for the answer.

"Well – we know this much. Only Dumbledore knows the full prophecy – and he's not likely to tell us anytime soon. The first part says: `The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches. Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies. And the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not..'" (HP – OoTP – Chpt.37)

Septima looked shocked. She knew all about prophecies and the often insidious way that their very existence caused peoples' actions to be manipulated. "So that's why Voldemort keeps coming after Harry?"

"Yup. We think there's more to the prophecy...at least another full line, maybe more, but unless or until we're able to get Harry back to England and then down into the Hall of Mysteries, we're not going to know for sure. Not that it really matters, one way or the other. Riddle – that's Voldemort's true name..."

"As in Thomas Marvolo Riddle?"

Sirius looked at her, shocked. "How.....how did you know?"

Septima looked at him for a moment and then said, "My grandfather went to school with Riddle, I think. I remember him talking about Riddle and about the students who mysteriously went missing while Riddle was a student. My uncle told me, before he retired, that Riddle had gone to work for Borgin & Burkes, in Knockturn Alley, years ago, when the shop was first opened. He said something about Riddle acting as an agent for them as they tried to collect rare, powerful items."

This seemed to intrigue Sirius, so she continued. "He told me one story that I still remember, about how Riddle disappeared, just dropped out of sight, after he had gone to see Hepzibah Smith about some things that she owned which Borgin & Burkes wanted to buy from her very badly."

"Any idea what Riddle got from her?"

"Actually, it's funny you should ask" Septima said, as she stretched out on her left side, facing Sirius on the picnic blanket. Sirius was entranced by Septima. The way her chestnut-brown hair cascaded down around her shoulders and the way her deep-blue eyes seemed to penetrate his very core made it hard for him to concentrate on what she was saying. Fortunately for him, Septima was aware of his staring and didn't mind it, as she found it hard not to stare herself into his own blue-grey eyes and take in the handsome chisel of his face.

When he realized that he was in fact staring at her, and had become too absorbed in her looks and the wonderful perfume she was wearing, he began laughing. His reaction brought her out of her own reverie and she said, "What's so funny?"

He smiled at her and said, "I'm sorry, Septima. I....I...well...it's been a long time since I've been around such a beautiful woman and I caught myself staring. I apologize."

Septima smiled at him: a warm, almost loving smile that spoke of hopes that had long been suppressed. "You're not the only one, Sirius" she said, softly.

His eyes said, "Really?". She nodded and held out a hand to pull him closer to her.

"Is this a date?" he said, almost not believing that this could be happening to him.

"I think so" she said, nervously wetting her lips; anticipating the thing that she hoped would happen.

"So....would it be improper to kiss on a first date?" he said equally hesitantly, and in an almost a boy's voice. Looking around, Septima saw many, many other couples also kissing in the afternoon sunshine, including the couple whom they were supposed to be guarding. "Seems like the thing to do" she said.

"Good" he said, before he leaned in close and their lips met for the first and Harry were not as oblivious as their minds thought and

hoped they might be and both of them were gleeful as they watched Sirius and Septima kiss for the first time. "Do you think that he's totally smitten already or will that be tomorrow"

Hermione's mind whispered in his. "A full massage tonight says he's already totally smitten" Hermione pushed Harry onto his back and tackled him with a full-on snog.

"You're on, buster."

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Little Hangleton, UK, June 30, 1995, 2:37 pm – in the grand parlor of the Riddle Estate

::I am hungry, Master. I must feed soon::

::Patience, Nagini. Soon you will be given a chance to feed. I must have you nearby to remind my followers who is in charge and whom they must obey::

The twenty-two foot long Black Mamba detested the chill that pervaded the house and spent most of its time near the warmth of the fireplace, just like its master. Sometimes thought, it had to go out to hunt. The hunting had not been good of late and so it was irritable. ::The bad bag-man comes, Master. May I eat him?::

::No, Nagini. He is not yours to take. Patience! There will be food aplenty when we move south::

::When, Master?::

::Soon, my pet, soon:: Riddle wondered why he had ever chosen Nagini as a pet. She was irritable, irascible, and dangerous and those were her good qualities. She was also almost perpetually hungry – which made her hard to control, even with the Rowena's scrying gem and the horcrux within it – safely nestled inside her. She also complained about the Gem constantly; saying that it made it hard for her to move and hard for her to swallow.

Riddle had no satisfactory answer for his pet on that point and so he simply told her to be quiet and obey his wishes.

The bit of intelligence and free-will that exposure to such powerful magic granted her also made it possible for the snake to realize that it was not a wholly satisfactory situation. She didn't know what to do about it, other than continue to complain to her master, but she knew that something had to be done.

Soon, the poisonous familiar heard the footsteps of the one she called the 'bad bag-man' and she slithered out of the way, as to avoid being stepped on. Then an odd instinct overtook her and almost without thought, she positioned her body so that she would be stepped on...in just the right place. She lay across the threshold of the doorway, her dark blue-black body blending in perfectly with the carpet that filled most of the room.

The clumsy human never saw her, nor realized, as his foot came down hard in just the right place, what he had done for her. The Scrying gem was protected, of course, against every type of magical attack that the young Thomas Riddle could think of. No amount of magical force could have hurt it, nor any type of fire, save for Fiendfyre. But, he had overlooked the obvious thing: that it was a Ruby and, like any other natural stone, could be broken by the same forces that made it in the first place. In this instance, the force was directed pressure – leading to rhombic parting.

If subjected to sufficient stress at certain points, all rubies break and...the downward weight of a medium-sized man, focused properly, was exactly sufficient. Nagini didn't really feel the gem crack in pieces and couldn't put the experience into words even if she had. However, she somehow resisted the temptation to bite the man who had just done her such service because she was now much more comfortable. She slithered out of the room, towards the one spot in the large house where the sun streamed in the window. She could eat once the 'bad bag-man' was gone.

For his part, Riddle would never feel the destruction of his horcrux, because it didn't happen all at once and wasn't going to, either. The three bits of the fragmented gem were, individually, just too small to contain the poisoned soul-piece and it was like a beaver-damn with a small, but constant leak. The power that kept the horcrux contained started to bleed away; taking with it hell-bound fragment.

"What news, Borgin?"

"It's Potter, my Lord. There's news, Sire."

"You try my patience, Borgin. Tell your Lord what you know or it will end badly for you"

Borgin swallowed hard and then said carefully, "Potter, my Lord....he's gone. Took his mudblood girlfriend with him. He's disappeared. So has over half of Hogwarts' staff, and all of the half-bloods and other mudbloods that we know of. They've all disappeared."

"What! Tell me everything you know!" Voldemort was visibly shaken by the news, though not in a way that was angry, but rather....elated.

Borgin began talking and didn't stop for more than twenty five minutes. When he was finished, Voldemort looked at him an expression that Borgin would have sworn was a smile on anyone else's face. "Very, very good Borgin. I am pleased. Very pleased. You have exceeded my expectations this day."

The man fell to one knee, but kept his eyes fixed firmly on the ground. "Thank you, my Lord! I live to serve you."

"And serve me you have, Borgin. As a reward, I will give you a chance to serve me again and become one of my most trusted lieutenants."

"Anything, my Lord!" "Good! Find out then what has become of my potions-master and my servant, Dawlish. They are missing and I would to know the reason why."

"Yes, my lord. Right away, my Lord!"

"Go then, Borgin. Serve me in all things." The 'bad bag-man' bowed low, and then turned to make his way out of the large room; quietly anxious to be out of direct contact with the dark lord.

Out of the corner of the room, seemingly out of the shadows themselves, oozed a menace that most of polite society preferred to avoid.

"Well Lucius, my slippery friend, what do you think? Is he telling the truth?"

Lucius Malfoy took a knee in front of his lord, as was his Lords' due, before he began speaking. "My Lord, I believe he speaks the truth. The ambient magic in Diagon Alley has dropped significantly and there are many fewer people shopping today. I have just come, my Lord, from dealing with the filthy Goblins, and even the lines at Gringotts were much shorter. Also, Ollivander has disappeared. His shop is empty."

"What? WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME THIS IMMEDIATELY! CRUCIO!"

Lucius Malfoy twisted in pain on the floor; the feeling of a thousand hot knives plunging into his body driving him close to momentary insanity. "Please, my Lorddddddddddddddd" he managed to get out, before the pain lifted.

"Tell me, Lucius, why I should spare you!"

"Because" Lucius said weakly from the floor, "There's more. Please...let me explain."

"This had better be important, Lucius", Riddle said dangerously.

"The Gryffindor vault has been claimed, my Lord. I saw it for my own eyes this morning when I went to obtain more funds for our cause. The vault-crest now reads 'Potter-Gryffindor'. Potter is the last of the Gryffindors....he must be, or else he couldn't claim the vault."

Riddle sat back hard in his chair; a feeling of unspeakable dread beginning to creep into what was left of his soul. The information, combined with the news of Ollivander's departure, was a hard blow.

There wasn't much he could do about it except try to solidify his position and recruit more followers – or so he thought.

Lucius was watching his Lord, even though his eyes were mostly downcast. "What if we were to attack now, Lord, while the fools at the Ministry are still off-guard and Dumbledore's distracted by the loss of his 'wonder-boy'?"

Riddle's eyes flicked up in surprise. He had genuinely not thought of doing anything so dramatic or bold. "What do you mean, Lucius?"

"Lord, if I may...it's just that with the followers you have now, we could make a strike at the Ministry and probably take on most all of the Aurors and win and if we planned it right, we could probably kill the Minister as well."

"Yes, Bones is a problem and needs to be gotten rid of, I agree."

"No my lord, not Bones. She's fled!" Immediately he kneeled again and waited for the pain to come...but it didn't. "What do you mean? When did this happen?"

"Please....please forgive me, Lord. I should have told you immediately. Yes, the talk was all over Gringotts this morning! Bones has fled. Resigned. She's left it to the Wizengamot to sort out. She and her daughter have left England. So has Minerva McGonagall. Dumbledore tried to keep it quiet, but one of the new grounds-keepers let it slip in the Hogs-head Inn that McGonagall left the school suddenly and hasn't been seen since. Hagrid is gone as well. I don't know how many others, but at least half my Lord. If there's ever been a time to strike it's now, while they are in disarray. We could take the school. We could use it to rally our forces and provide ourselves with an almost impregnable base of operations."

Riddle mulled it over carefully. Lucius was not a strategist usually, but his observation was, he thought, spot-on. Attacking the school had the added bonus of being a totally unexpected play.

"Assemble our forces, Lucius. I am impressed with your conclusion and we will act on your suggestion."

Lucius Malfoy was astonished at his master's change of tone. Having his suggestion immediately adopted was something that had never happened to him before. "Rise my friend and do my bidding. I am pleased with the information you have brought me today and it may very well lead to our success much sooner than I had anticipated."

As the blonde-haired pureblood tried to rise, he felt the immediate pain left over from being tortured with the Cruciatus curse. His hands shot to his back and tried to rub away the almost crippling pain. Then something happened that he could not have expected in a thousand lifetimes. Lord Voldemort apologized.

"I believe I have erred today, Lucius. I am well-pleased with the information you have brought to me. I will take away your pain."

He bowed his head and said quietly, "Thank you, my Lord. I live to serve you."

"And I will remember that, Lucius. Take this" he said, holding out a vial that he had taken from an inside pocket of his cloak. "It will heal you and take away the pain. I have saved it against the day that one of my most trusted lieutenants was injured and needed healing."

Very carefully, Lucius took the vial from his masters' hand, opened it, drank it, and then fell to his knees as the pain was washed away from his body. "My life is yours, my Lord. Thank you for believing in me."

"You were my first follower, my friend. I have been negligent with your care. Go now and work our will."

"Always, my Lord."

Lucius rose and backed away respectfully. He had a great deal to do and many owls to send before his day was concluded. He had just had the most extraordinary meeting with his Lord that he had ever experienced and he was even more determined to help him carry out his plan to rule the magical world.

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

From Chapter five - "The fall before the winters' wind"

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Saturday, July 01, 1995 – Canada Day – Boston, MA. – On a private pier near Northern Avenue.

Minerva McGonagall stepped off the gangplank lightly and appraised the situation. It was late morning in Boston and the wind was off the water, keeping the city at a very nice 74 degrees. She was feeling freer than she had in more than thirty years and her step, as she walked along, showed it. In her purse were the two things that were precious beyond description: All of Hogwarts' student-records and the book. She was determined to not just find Harry and Hermione Potter, but give them the precious records and make sure that every Muggleborn and less-than-pureblood student who was destined to turn 11 over the course of the next three or four or however many years, would be found and safely whisked out of England – at least until Riddle was defeated and Albus Dumbledore no longer controlled Hogwarts.

Minerva looked about, seeing how many young people there were, and was glad that she had finally been able to drop the silly glamour that she had worn for so many years. It had added age and 'gravitas' to her appearance while she had been the Deputy Headmistress, but did nothing for her now except make her feel much older than she truly was. With it gone, she knew that no one she had known

would recognize her now. Once again beautifully lean and fit, with bright red, lustrous hair, bright blue eyes, and perfect, porcelain skin, she looked and felt like she was in her mid-thirty's. Swinging her precious carry-on over her shoulder, Minerva McGonagall blended into the crowd and happily disappeared into what her American colleagues liked to call the 'brain center' of the United States.

An hour and a half later, Minerva stepped off the commuter-rail train, just outside the little seaside town of Newburyport, Massachusetts. She had chosen to ride the train, 'Muggle-style', rather than to try to apparate blindly, and was not at all displeased with her choice. She had caught up on the local news (what there was of it) via the local paper, The Boston Globe, while looking for both the subtle and not-so-subtle indications of the presence of 'magicals' in the area. Twice while on the train she had felt like she had at least passed by areas that were magically warded, but she couldn't be sure.

Once in downtown Newburyport, however, she was quite sure that there was magic in the area and she quickly set about trying to find its source. Even if she didn't find it immediately, the search made the already pleasant afternoon that much more interesting. She knew that she'd eventually find the person or persons who were doing the magic and she'd be another step closer to finding Harry and Hermione. Besides, she thought as she smiled a private smile, no one said I had to find them straight away.

Two hours later, Minerva found what she was looking for. It was a very well disguised magical shopping area, the entrance for which stood between a cozy little tea shop with crystal sun-catchers hanging in the front windows, and a dusty, cluttered-filled antique store that were separated by a very narrow alley. To any Muggle passer-by, it would look like just what it seemed – a one foot (or so) wide alley, filled with pieces of garbage and an occasional weed. For Minerva however, it was a magical portal that she could immediately sense led to somewhere else. Sliding her wand down the inside of her left shirt-sleeve, so that only the tip showed, she touched a series of bricks in a particular order and then smiled when the portal glowed for a moment. Checking to see if there were any Muggles in the immediate area who might be disturbed by her sudden disappearance, she saw that there were none. Whistling a fragment of an Italian tune that she remembered from her early days, she lightly stepped through the portal and disappeared.

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Diagon Alley, London - July 01, 1995

Lucius Malfoy looked around as he walked up and down the Alley and as he did so, a very cold and hard ball of fear began to form in the pit of his stomach. Of the dozen or so 'anchor' stores that had once dominated the Alley, all but Gringotts Bank were gone, and it appeared from the surreptitious movements of workers in and around the entrance to the bank, that the Goblins also knew which way the wind was blowing and were preparing to quietly pack up and leave.

Of the stores that had left, the two that bothered him most were the bank, for obvious reasons, and Ollivander's Wand shop – which had been doing business, more or less continuously, in pretty much the same location for 2,377 years.

He stopped one man, coming out of a boarded-up shop which Lucius recognized as the former home of Flourish and Blotts. "Excuse me." The man looked up, a frightened expression on his face. Lucius continued, "Can you tell me where the store has gone?"

The man sputtered and then said quietly, so as not to be overheard, "Gone they have. All gone. Moved to the States I hear. Never see them again until he-who-must-not-be-named is gone for good. All gone..." The man shook his head and finished locking the door. "G'day, goven'r"

Lucius simply stood there for a moment, trying to process what he had just heard. Rather than trying to debate the frightened old man, the elder Malfoy turned on his heel and strode back up the Alley, towards the public disappearance points. His mind was churning furiously as he thought about all of the implications that came from an empty, abandoned Diagon Alley. Not a single one of them was good, he knew, and the more he thought about the situation, the more anxious he became.

Reaching the public disappearance point, he quickly shifted himself home and back into the security of the unplotable, heavily warded estate. He knew that he had to talk to someone about what he had just seen. He had to get his thoughts in order before he approached his master. It was true that Lucius Malfoy was his master's man,

through and through... but he was also not a fool. Walking into his lord's presence without complete information was tantamount to openly inviting one's own death and that was the very last thing he wanted. He had tasted quite enough of his lords' displeasure already and was willing to go the 'extra mile' to avoid ever tasting it again.

The old, heavy oak desk that sat facing the back garden was as good a place as any to start making lists of the things that he needed to do and to consider. His lord had tasked him with the responsibility of planning a (successful) attack on both the Ministry itself and on Hogwarts. It was a very heavy burden just on its face, but compounded at every step by the fact that there were so many unknowns.

As he sat writing, thousands of scenarios began filtering through his mind. Each was analyzed and then kept or discarded, on its own merits. One thing that he recognized immediately was that no matter how many sympathizers his lord had in the Ministry, most were not in a position to be a help in an attempted coup d'état. That would have to be left to his lords' core group of followers. The question then became: could they really capture both the Ministry and Hogwarts? The Ministry building itself was sizable and would take a considerable force to establish control. Hogwarts was the same way – only it had overlapping, (as far as he knew) 1000-yr. old magical defenses that had never, ever been breached.

The problem festered in his mind for a while, until he started making a list of what he knew about the current situation. At the moment that he began listing known assets – for his lords' side and for the 'other' side, a very large smile appeared on his face. He realized that he had been more right than wrong. Hogwarts was the logical target. Not only had most all of the professors fled the country, leaving the Headmaster with little or no magical support, but any student – including his master's sworn enemy, Harry Potter – who might have actively opposed them had as well. It left the castle an almost barren, magical fortress – which made it almost too tempting to resist.

The decision all-but-made, Lucius began thinking about the problem of getting his master's forces in place for an attack. The supply and logistical problems that he had begun to anticipate were grating on him, but he knew that for the moment, there was nothing he could do about them but stew. It wasn't as though he was a business or logistics expert like Malcom Parkinson, he thought.

Malcom. Perfect, he thought. He should be in. There's no reason that I couldn't reach him. He's always been open to business with our family and they've always done business with the Muggles. He can get anything we need.

Lucius stood and strode over to the fireplace, reaching for a handful of floo-powder as he did so. A quick fire charm, a handful of the powder, and suddenly he had a secure, open connection to the floo-network. Putting his head into the magical green flames, he called out, "Malcom's retreat". The floo-network reacted to his command in the same way it always did – by trying to establish a magical link with the household on the other end. But, much like a Muggle telephone's ring, the regular pulses of magic went unanswered. There was no magical equivalent of an answering machine, so the elder Malfoy's call went nowhere.

Without thinking, the tall, blonde man said into the air, "Dobby!" Nothing happened. To his bitter embarrassment and chagrin, Lucius Malfoy remembered that he had lost the elf to Harry Potter's service at the end of the meddlesome brat's second year at Hogwarts. It made the older man want to hurt someone... very, very badly. House elves were worth considerably more than their weight in gold or galleons and Harry Potter had done the obvious to trick him into accidentally releasing the elf from his service. For that, he was sure that his Crucio would be almost as powerful as his lords' was when he was truly angry.

Realizing that he needed to know what was happening with Gruoch and Malcom Parkinson, Lucius opened the left-hand door of the double-doors that led out onto the green-granite patio. Three paths radiated out from the patio, each leading to a separate part of the manicured garden. Following the left-hand path, Lucius made his way along for almost an eighth of a mile before he came to a secluded, shady glade that had a small pond in the middle. It was the family's most hallowed grounds – and the entrance to the place where family members were interred. The mausoleum-type entrance of the catacombs, which had been magically carved out of the massive batholith that lay just beneath the entire region, stood on the north side of the glade. It was also, conveniently, the primary entrance to his sanctum sanctorum, which housed the mirror-perfect, granite basin that held his most closely guarded secret – his scrying pool.

A half-hour later, Lucius Malfoy stood trembling at the side of the pool. It had done everything he had asked it to do... and that was exactly the problem he was having. Everywhere he had turned his magical eye, there was silence. Magical families up and down the length of the country... ones that he had long counted on as being either reluctant but obedient supporters of his lord or families over whom he held some terrible, if not-often-mentioned form of control which compelled their service, were gone. Their homes were empty, their businesses closed, and their neighborhoods still as graveyards.

A terrible, awful chill was closing in about him as he thought about what the widespread abandonment meant for his lords' cause. No matter how he viewed the problem, the end was always the same: failure and defeat. Some paths took longer than others to play out, but they all ended at the same place. Could he tell his master that awful truth and live to talk about it? Did he dare not tell him? Was there anywhere that he could go where the mark on his arm would not compel his obedience? The thoughts were racing through his head as he leaned against the pool's edge.

Looking down, he wondered if it were possible to see outside of the Kingdom. He had never tried to do so before, as he had never had need to do so before. Closing his eyes, he tried to clear his mind, so that he could focus on the image that he needed. When he was sure that he had it, he opened his mind and began the incantation which would set the magical device in motion.

After a moment's time, the mirror-still surface of the pool began to move in irregular, but identifiable patterns – like hot gasses billowing out of a smoke stack on a very cold day – before the image settled down to reveal Harry Potter walking along a country lane, hand in hand with a girl who's name he could not remember, but knew he should know. The scene was tranquil, but otherwise not unusual. Watching for a moment, Lucius tried to identify anything that might reveal where the young couple was. After several long, frustrating minutes, he realized that he could not. However, he felt buoyed anyway, because simply having found them was a success. It didn't solve the overall problem, but it was something that he could offer his master. Whether it would keep him from being punished... was anyone's guess.

[illegible]

Central offices, MI-5 & ¾ - Directorate F - Thames House – Millbank, London, UK – Monday, July 3, 1995

Basements suck. Worldwide, working in the basement just sucks. There's no natural light, the ventilation stinks, and there's always a pervasive smell of mildew. In order to work without complaint in a basement, the money had to be worth it... or... the job had to be so compelling that the 'downsides' were tolerable.

John Avery was a man with a mission, in such a job, and for all intents and purposes, was the senior-most officer in all of MI-5. He was even more senior than Stella Rimington, who nominally headed up all of MI-5 and his responsibilities were far greater and far more terrifying than anything "Ms. Rimington" could even imagine.

To the outside world, Directorate F was charged with "internal surveillance of subversives, trade unions, radical and campaigning groups, and of terrorist groups (including the IRA)". However, MI-5¾, the true heart of Directorate F, had a much broader-ranging responsibility. Responsibility that was of such importance that only four people in all of Great Britain, outside those who worked for the department, knew about it. They watched those who didn't want to be watched and those who could kill with a word and then disappear. In other words, they were responsible for tracking the magical populace of Great Britain. It was a very daunting task and he had neither the staff nor the resources that he really needed to do the job properly. In other words, it was a typical government office.

On this bright and sunny Monday morning, John Christian Percival Avery, the great grand-nephew of one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore (though neither party knew it), sat at his desk and wondered why everything had suddenly and so dramatically gone wrong. More than eighty thousand people had suddenly disappeared out of his 'jurisdiction' in less than eighteen days, or almost forty-five hundred people per day. It was horrifying... and totally unexplainable. No word had come from their contacts inside the magical world, or from his counterparts in other countries, explaining the exodus or warning them of some kind of impending disaster and yet, every magical being that he knew of, every family over whom his department watched, had left the country. It made his blood run very, very cold indeed.

The phone rang – which, of itself, wasn't that unusual. However, the voice on the other end was unusual.

"John?" the voice said.

"Yes, who's this? He said, not recognizing the voice.

The woman laughed softly. "My name is Minerva, John. And before you ask, you knew me as 'whiskers'."

THAT name rang a bell with him. A very large bell, in fact. 'Whiskers' was responsible for more quality information than any of his other sources in the magical world. She was also known by his agents as having eluded their efforts to identify her more than thirty times. He knew that she was an invaluable asset and contact and he had to treat her respectfully or she might disappear forever.

"Well, Minerva, to what do I owe the pleasure of hearing your voice?" he said, trying to make sure that his voice was both soft and friendly.

"I've left England, John, and thought you might want to know what's going on, before I disappear entirely."

His curiosity got the better of him and he asked, before he could stop himself, "How did you get this number?"

The woman on the other end of the phone laughed a merry laugh. "Oh John, for someone who has spent so many years watching all of us, there are so many things you still don't know."

"Well? Are you going to satisfy my curiosity? Just this once?"

She thought about it for a moment. The Statute of Secrecy wasn't implicated really if she answered truthfully, and she more or less trusted the man on the other end of the phone, so she said, "Oh, why not. Ok, I read one of your operatives' minds. He was so concerned, the poor thing, about reporting back that he was practically broadcasting the information. I just dipped in for a second and took the number. He was a cute one, too. How old are your recruits, anyway?"

John was floored. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. A squib by birth and a cast-off from the magical world at a very early age, he had been forced to make his way in the Muggle world. He had been written out of the family fortune because of his lack of magical ability and his name had been stricken from the family genealogy... which made him a 'non-person', devoid of value or importance. It might have still rankled him, if he hadn't become so successful in the 'agency with no name'. The only difficulty was that he actually knew very little about his 'home world' – about what being magical really meant – which included not knowing about such things as Legilimens.

The implications of what he had just been told were huge...and terrifying. If magical people could read the thoughts of non-magicals that easily, then no secret was truly safe. That meant that any government agent or elected official could be compromised without his or her superiors, or even the person him or herself, knowing about it.

He couldn't react though. He knew he had to keep calm and try to keep the fear out of his voice. "Old enough, Minerva. At least old enough that he should have known better."

That earned another chuckle. "Let me ask you something, then. Where did you get that horrendously plaid chair? You know... the one in the far corner of your office?"

His stomach contracted another several inches. She had just told him that she herself, or one of her companions, had been into his office without his knowing about it. "It was a gift from my father" he said, his voice shaking a bit.

"Don't be frightened, John. You have nothing to fear from me. However, there are some whom you do need to fear, and that's why I'm calling. I need to tell you a story and you need to listen and take notes. Everything I'm telling you can be found in your records or can be otherwise verified."

"Ok" he said, grabbing a pen and a pad of paper. "Shoot."

The conversation went on for more than forty-five minutes. Every once in a while John would ask her to stop, while he wrote things down. Sometimes he stopped and sucked in a breath while the

reality of magic and its sometimes awful consequences began to sink in. When she was done, he asked her one final question. Her answer scared him even more than all the other things that he had just been told. She said, "No." He didn't even have a chance to thank her for all that she had done for him before her voice disappeared from the line.

For the longest time afterwards, the head of MI 5¾ sat and thought about what he had learned. He knew that what he had been told had been edited. There were just not enough details at certain points in the story. However, there was a broad enough overview that he knew he'd be able to fill in many of the gaps himself... or more specifically, that his agents would be able to fill in the gaps at his direction. Once they were done though, he was pretty confident that he'd have a report to give the PM and HRH, the likes of which had never, ever been seen before.

He had no idea that one Amelia Susan Bones, the (now) former Minister for Magic, had done the very same thing, but to the PM directly, just hours before she had left Office and then left the country.

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Late afternoon, at the Magical border between the Federated Magical States of America and the Fédération Magique du Quebec – July 7, 1995

Minerva McGonagall gave the inspector her (magical) British passport as well as her Muggle one, and then produced her wand, for their inspection. Their review was quick, but thorough. The Priori Incantatem was standard procedure, as was a check for Polyjuice and for the Imperius curse. When all the tests came back negative she was allowed to pass through without further question.

Once she was a LONG ways away from the border guards, she sighed with relief that they hadn't asked about the two incredibly magical items that were in her possession – the Book of Names and the miniaturized collection of 'dark' / forbidden books from the restricted section at Hogwarts. Questions about them could have led her into a very sticky legal situation, not to mention risking their confiscation. She would have sent them ahead to Harry and Hermione, but she didn't dare risk having the owl intercepted, so she

kept them with her at all times; hoping that she'd be able to breeze through customs.

Her two favorite students had owed her back quickly once they had learned that she was in the States and relatively nearby. The parchment had arrived still tear-stained, from where Hermione (she had assumed) had cried on it before sending it along. It had said, very, very briefly:

"Please come soonest. Miss you and need you here. Be careful!
Love, Harry and Hermione"

Attached to the note was a single small, crystal vial. Minerva recognized it immediately as a memory-crystal. She hoped (and trusted) that the memory inside was of a safe apparition-point wherever the two of them were, so she brought the vial up and worked the cork loose, but didn't remove it until the vial was right up close to her forehead. Then she popped the cork free and pressed the mouth of the vial to her skin.

The memory was almost instantly sucked into her mind; a process she likened to a Ceti Eel – a horrifying little creature she once saw in a Muggle movie. The memory itself though was exactly what she thought it would be: a perfect memory of the place to which she'd soon be apparating.

Making sure that her things were all secure, she looked about and saw that there was no one watching her, closed her eyes, and disappeared.

Three hundred and fifteen miles away, Dame Minerva McGonagall (Grand Cross), former Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts, and fifteen-time winner of the Pan European Transfiguration Competition, appeared in the middle of a small clearing. It was late afternoon and she was surrounded on all sides by the fragrant smells of the sweet birch trees and the sounds of Eastern Kingbirds singing in the trees.

Looking around, she realized that she had absolutely no idea where she was, nor whether she was actually alone in the glade. Her wand was in her hand almost instantly before she changed her mind and turned into her other animagus form... the one that she didn't register with the Ministry. While being a cat was fun, being a BIG cat was even more fun. That made being a mountain lion a whole lot of

fun. In a half-dozen strides, she was out of the clearing and into the safety of the shade, where she could bed down and hide.

She was sleepy and a little hungry when two massive magical signatures appeared out of thin air, stirring her out of her stupor and bringing her to full wakefulness in a split-second. She looked out from where she lay and saw two figures; both were wearing dark green cloaks, and standing back to back, looking.

"Feel her, 'Mione?" Harry said, over their link as he scanned the edge of the glade.

"She's close."

"Split up. I'll take the half in front of me, you take the other half. Work clockwise."

"Be careful, love."

One minute the two were in the middle of the glade and the next, they were gone. Minerva tried to follow their movements, but they were far too fast. Her first instinct was to run and the next was to disapparate away. However, she was too slow in her decision making. Ten seconds later, she felt a wand-tip between her ears, prodding her. "Get up very slowly. Don't try to run. You'll never make it." one voice said, in a soft contralto voice, before the wand was withdrawn.

Minerva did as she was told. If these two were Harry and Hermione, they'd do exactly whatever it took to make sure that she was who they thought she was and if she weren't... well... that didn't bear contemplating. Harry was the most protective person she'd seen since his father, James, and if she tried anything funny, she'd most likely end up dead.

Drawing out her transformation back to human, she made sure that it was obvious that she was not a threat. At the moment, neither seemed to be holding a wand, but that didn't matter. Wands were not the be-all and end-all of magical weapons. Staves and enchanted items of every kind were also usable in the hands of trained individuals and she was also well aware of what Muggles could do just with their bare hands. She was a woman after all, and a petite one at that. A man (or a well-trained woman) could hurt her

quite badly and there was no reason to provoke either of the two individuals who had caught her.

When she was done transforming, she was immediately hit with several spells and charms, none of which hurt her at all. There was a brief white glow around her body and then both individuals threw back their cowls.

"Professor!" the female almost shouted.

Dumbfounded, Minerva McGonagall looked at the strikingly beautiful, tanned young woman in front of her. "Hermione?" she said.

"Mrs. Potter now, thank you very much!" Hermione said happily.

"Harry?"

"Hello Minnie. It's good to see you too" Harry said, a soft smile on his face.

"Why all the drama?" the older woman said.

"Wanted to make sure you weren't followed and that you weren't under the influence of anything. A lot has happened since your owl got to us yesterday."

She arched an eyebrow in a look that was pretty much her signature move. "Do tell."

"Hogwarts fell yesterday afternoon."

The news that the School had been captured was somehow not unexpected, though it still struck her in the pit of her stomach. Finally, she regained her composure and said, "Well, good luck to them. They'll not be getting into the important areas any time soon."

"There's more, Minnie. Charlus... died defending the school. He was the only casualty, but Riddle killed him. Albus fled. Without teachers to back him up and with no students around to help fend off Tommy's minions, the school was ripe for takeover. We just got word that the Ministry was ransacked as well, but nothing of value was lost. The Unspeakables made sure that everything of value in the Ministry was hidden in time. All of the employees who are still

loyal to the government and to Albus have retreated - well, save Rufus. He was killed as well, along with Percy Weasley. The rest... well, we're not sure where they've gone, but it's likely they'll re-group and try to figure out how to govern at a distance."

The three turned and started walking back towards the center of the glade as they talked. "How did you hear?" their former professor asked.

"Dobby. He's the one who brought us the news about Charlus and he's the one who's organized all of the now free elves who suddenly found themselves masterless when the school was taken. There were more than two hundred of them. Harry's taken them into his service for the interim and is paying all of them as their official employer, just like Albus did. Only Harry's got the elves organizing themselves and making decisions on their own about where to live and how to get things done. It's all rather sudden. Without Dobby... and Winky as well, we'd never have been able to do it so fast."

Minerva thought that Dobby's actions, and those of the Hogwarts Elves were actually a much larger piece of news than the castle itself being taken. She wondered if it was even possible to run the school without the elves, given all the things that they did behind the scenes. She thought not, but was interested to see how the situation played out.

When the three made it to the center of the clearing, Hermione looked up at her former professor and mentor and said, "Hold on tight."

Instinctively, Minerva put a hand around each of her students and then held on tight.

A moment later, Minerva opened her eyes and realized that she was standing on a plain, overlooking a city. "Where are we?" she asked politely.

"Quebec City, Quebec. We're standing on the Plain of Abraham, above the city. Hermione and I thought that this would be a good place to bring you first, to show you where we're going to be for the next couple of years."

Minerva's face broke into a large grin. Though she had never been to Canada before, she knew all about the L'Ecole Magique du Quebec and the people who made up its staff. Harry, Hermione, and all of the others were in for a rare treat, she thought.

"We need to talk, Harry. I have a great deal of news for you two and many things to share before you start classes. I bring word from Godric Gryffindor."

That stopped Harry dead in his tracks. As the founders' last heir, Harry felt a kinship with the man that he didn't understand at all, but had come to accept since inheriting the vault at Gringotts. Hermione felt it, though not as strongly, but was even more curious than he about what Gryffindor had said.

"Dobby!" Harry called into the air, as if talking to the wind itself.

There was a sudden, but very, very quiet pop! that announced the arrival the highly animated elf. "Yes, Master Harry? What can I be doing for you?"

Harry smiled. "First, give your Headmistress a hug, as I know you're dying to do..." Dobby's eyes grew very, very wide when he saw her and he practically sprang at the beautiful, red-haired, middle-aged woman; wrapping her leg in an enormous and enthusiastic hug.

Wiping away a tear, he said, "I thought I'd never see you again. Dobby was very, very sad."

Minerva reached down and stroked one of Dobby's ears gently, which made him hum with pleasure. "It's good to see you too, my diminutive friend. I wasn't sure whether I was going to get out in one piece or not, either."

Before the elf's greeting got out of hand, Harry said "Dobby? Could you go to our favorite places and get us a good lunch? You know what we like. Bring us two bottles of that wonderful wine also. I think we're going to need it. Oh... here's some cash for the lunch. You'll need it." Harry handed the elf two dark green twenty's and a purple-ish colored ten, along with a 'Toonie'. "The 'Toonie' is for you, Dobby. You'll need some of the Muggle money up here for your own needs... so that's a start, ok?"

Dobby, having dealt with Harry since the end of Harry's second year at Hogwarts, knew better than to fight him over being 'paid too much'. Dobby simply accepted the little bit of extra cash and again promised himself silently that he would be the very best helper and friend to Harry than any elf could be. "I'll be back soonest, Master Harry!" he said in the happiest voice he could and then disappeared.

"He's gotten a bit odder since I last saw him, I think" Minerva said to Harry and Hermione as they sat down together on a nice-looking, grassy spot overlooking the broad expanse of plain. "Not that it's a problem really... it's just that you did something to him Harry, when you got him released."

Harry rubbed his face with both hands and then said, "Yea, I know. But there was nothing I could do. Malfoy was asking for it by the way he treated Dobby and it sure as hell gained us a powerful ally. There's nothing in the world that would turn Dobby against us."

Hermione had long since put 'S.P.E.W' behind her, realizing that it was a bad idea to begin with. Forced liberation of elves would have never worked and besides which, she wasn't the one with the power to do it anyway. That power had always rested with the Headmaster and not her, and she knew in retrospect that she had been presumptuous as hell to think that she, barely a teenage girl, could achieve something like that. More, it had been the sheerest arrogance to liberate a group of people without first having thought through all of the possible repercussions. Harry had been right about it and though she was somewhat ashamed to admit it, he had been right to ask her to drop it when he did.

They spoke for several minutes more before Dobby returned with the lunch that Harry had requested. Once he was gone and their lunch was spread before them, Harry looked at his transfiguration professor and said, after tearing off a chunk of French bread and slathering it with some soft brie, "Gryffindor...?"

McGonagall flicked some crumbs off her lap, took a swallow of the wonderful white wine that Harry had ordered, put it down, and then said "You have to understand Harry, that only two people have ever seen Godric's ghost. I'm number two. Nicolas Flamel was number one... and that was more than six hundred years ago."

Hermione could feel the intensity of Harry's curiosity and knew that he was doing everything he could to restrain himself from overwhelming the woman with questions. She admired the fact that he was staying within himself and allowing their professor to tell the story the way that she wanted to, rather than having it dragged out of her.

Harry did, however, make a hand gesture that made it quite obvious that he was anxious to hear the rest of the story. Minerva laughed and she put up her hands in a placating way. "Ok, ok! I'll tell you this much immediately: Godric and the others are not willing to allow the building to be used against us. They have certain controls in place that will allow them to prevent any of the school's defensive magics from being used against those who should rightfully be there... meaning us. When the time is right, the founders will help us. That much I'm certain of."

"Does she know about Neville? That he's also one of Godric's heirs?" Harry asked Hermione silently.

"I doubt it. She was told about your status, but I'm pretty sure that Amelia wouldn't have mentioned Neville's status to anyone if she didn't have to."

"Minnie? Did Amelia say anything to you about Neville?"

She looked at him and then thought about what he might really be asking. The fact that Harry was holding his wife's hand a bit tighter and had pulled her a bit closer to him told her that the young couple was waiting for a particular piece of information. Minerva thought about all that Amelia had said about Neville and realized that there hadn't actually been all that much. "No. She didn't. Why?"

"How far can we trust her?" Hermione asked over their bond.

"With everything, I think. She's a trained Occlumens and she's our friend. She has the right to know. Besides, she might remember something that we need to know" he replied, just as silently. Turning to their teacher/friend/mentor, Harry said aloud "Neville is the heir-presumptive of House Gryffindor. He's descended from Godric's younger son, where I'm descended from Godric's older son, making me the heir." Harry held up his hand and showed her the ring that

signified that he was Lord Gryffindor. "One ring to rule them all, one ring to find them..." Harry thought to his bride, laughing silently.

"Prat! I was just about to say the same thing. You beat me to it".

The former transfiguration teacher watched the interplay between her former students and couldn't help but be heartened by it. Their love for each other was very, very obvious, as was the strength of their relationship. It had been a very long time since she had felt the kind of love that the two were experiencing and she found that she missed it a great deal.

Shaking her head, she pushed past her feelings of loss and sadness and tried to focus on the moment. The first thing that had to be addressed was the issue of Neville and his inheritance. She was curious as to why Amelia hadn't mentioned anything about the situation, especially if she knew it. Then she realized that at the time, neither was sure that they'd escape the Ministry, much less make it out of the country safely, and it probably made sense not to discuss more than was absolutely necessary. She also remembered that she had promised to send her Patronus to Amelia as soon as she had made contact with Harry and Hermione. She had the sudden urge to do it immediately, but then thought better of it, suspecting that there were just too many Muggles in the area to risk it. She'd have to wait until they made it to wherever Harry and Hermione were staying, presuming that it was at a location which allowed for magic to be performed.

"So you're Lord Potter-Gryffindor then, just as Amelia said?"

"Yes. I'll eventually inherit the Black Family lordship too... if Sirius doesn't have any children. If he does, then his eldest will inherit. I'm betting on the fact that he will though and that I'll be able to stay as I am."

Minerva nodded. "Well, let's finish the story that I started."

"Please" Hermione and Harry said in perfect synchronicity.

Harry looked at his beloved wife with a huge, silly smile on his face and then turned and said to Minerva, "Hold that thought for a second".

Waiting for neither Minerva's acknowledgement nor her acquiescence, Harry grabbed Hermione with both hands and tackled her; knocking her onto her back, so that he could kiss her more thoroughly. When they came up for air, each had slightly swollen lips and glowed with a look of togetherness that can't be faked.

"Ok" Harry said with a huge smile, "Now where were we?"

Sirius Black and his new girlfriend watched as the Harry, Hermione, and Minerva McGonagall got up and walked off. While the transfiguration professor was momentarily distracted, Harry flashed Sirius the 'all-clear' sign that they had agreed on before Minerva's arrival. Acknowledging it, Sirius turned his attention back to the woman seated beside him who was quickly displacing all of his previous cares and fears in the world.

"So far, so good."

"Time will tell, Siri. I won't let Minerva know I'm here until I can get her alone and talk to her about what I've seen."

"Probably just as well" he said, touching the back of her hand softly.

"How do you think she'll react when she hears all of the news?"

"Don't know. She'll be relieved that so many got out, of course, but angry that we had to abandon ship like a bunch of rats. With Hogwarts taken and the Ministry gone, there's no organizing force to keep Riddle from trying to make a move on the other countries. It's a damn good thing that the French, German, Dutch, and Belgian ministries are still very strong and organized or Riddle might have a serious shot at taking over all of Western Europe."

"What about Albus? Aren't you worried that he's going to come after Harry?"

Sirius leaned back on both hands, letting the fading, late-afternoon sun warm his face. "Not really. I mean, yes, it's always a possibility... and Remus and I have talked about what we'd do to anyone who came looking for Harry... but we're not worried right now. Albus will go looking all over Europe trying to find Harry before he ever comes to the States...and..." Sirius emphasized the last word "...we've laid down enough false tracks that he'll be looking

around for a very long time before he realizes that Harry's not, in fact, in the States and comes up here."

"How many are we going to lose back home before Harry's ready to take on Riddle?"

Sirius thought about that for a few moments before saying, "Don't know, really. It depends on a couple of things. One is whether Riddle turns on his own followers and starts killing them simply because he has no one else upon whom to take out his anger. Another is whether or not the ICW puts together a force to go in and oust Riddle before Harry is fully trained. I know the Americans have twenty five hundred of what they call 'special forces' – hit wizards who are also trained in Muggle fighting techniques. They'd probably be enough, just by themselves, to do the job... but I don't know if they'd be sent to foreign soil."

Septima whistled at the numbers. At its strongest, the British Ministry for Magic had only six hundred Aurors and three hundred hit-wizards, so she knew that twenty-five hundred 'special forces' was a significant hammer to be able to wield. "Will Albus fight back?"

Sirius shook his head sadly. "No. At least, I don't think so. He saw quite enough killing when he took down Grindelwald. You know what the Germans still call him?"

She looked up at her boyfriend, smiling as she thought of him that way. "No."

"They call him, 'Geisthersteller' – 'The Ghost-maker'. He killed, or least the Germans think that he killed, more than twenty-two thousand Germans in his efforts to get at Grindelwald. Since then, Albus has never taken a life, even when it was clear that it was necessary. The Potters probably died because Albus refused to kill Riddle early on, when he was still vulnerable."

"Then why is he so hot to get his hands on Harry?"

Pulling Septima down, so that her head was laying against his chest, Sirius said, "Well we think, though we can't prove it yet, that Albus knows that Riddle has to die, once and for all, and that he wants to sacrifice Harry in sort of a 'mutual annihilation'. Remus thinks that

the Weasleys were to be Albus' way of controlling and manipulating Harry so that he'd be willing to sacrifice himself to protect them. Specifically, so that he'd be willing to protect their youngest daughter, Ginny. That plan failed though, since Harry was already totally and completely in love with Hermione. In fact, after the confrontation with Albus – where Harry defeated him in single combat..."

"WHAT?" Septima sat up very straight and whipped around, so that she was facing Sirius at eye level. "You never said anything about that before."

"That's because, love, I didn't know how far I could trust you. Now I know I can, so I'm telling you everything."

Her eyes lit up and her expression immediately softened as she thought about the implications of what he had just said – not so much about Harry and Albus, but about his feelings. It didn't hurt at all that he had called her, 'love'. She flicked a small piece of grass off her otherwise perfectly clean, off-white linen, knee-length skirt. Her movements were delicate and Sirius watched her hands move. She caught his gaze and said, "What are you thinking?"

He smiled. "Nothing. Well, nothing overly important at least. I was just watching your hands and thinking about how good they felt when you touched my face."

She scooted closer to him and leaned in, so that she could kiss him. For a man who had been in Azkaban for almost twelve years, his lips were remarkably soft she thought. "HMMMMMM. You have no idea how good that feels, Siri."

He reached up and softly stroked her face with the back of his hand. "I think I do, love. You do things to me that I thought I'd never, ever get to feel again. I prayed every night for someone like you."

Even as emotionally strong as she was, Septima felt his sadness – all of it - and all but melted into his arms; kissing him fiercely and for once, letting down her guard with the man she had grown to care about very, very much. She had no idea how much her love would change the way Sirius Black looked at the world.

[illegible]

The Great Hall, Hogwarts – early morning, July 8, 1995

Thomas Riddle – or what was left of him – sat in quiet but terrified contemplation. He was a hunted man, though none of his followers knew it. They thought he was the brilliant leader of the revolution against the former status-quo and the 'forces of the light' and they all happily prostrated themselves before him as he sat on the throne that had previously been occupied by one Albus Dumbledore.

On a table to his side, hidden from all eyes by his own, lay the broken pieces of the Tiara, his school cup / award for 'special services', Rowena Ravenclaw's Scrying gem, and his torched, burned, and blackened school diary. He looked at them and realized that the other two items – Helga's wand and Salazar Slytherin's locket were missing. He knew that if they were lost and in the hands of his enemy, that his days were numbered. It scared him in a way that he could not possibly describe and did not dare share with any of his followers, lest one or more of them decide to try their hand at dispatching him.

Looking around, he thought about all that he had experienced in the Great Hall and all that he had promised himself that he would achieve before he returned to it. Though he had achieved each and every feat of great magic that he had set out to accomplish, the feeling of looming failure haunted him. Having seen Harry Potters' most potent and powerful memories and then having been summarily cast out of the boy's mind told him more about his own frailty than he could ever willingly acknowledge, even to himself.

It had been a very, very lucky thing he thought, that his most loyal, if most psychotic servant – Bella – had not been around to see his ultimate failure and inability to stay in control of the boy after he had possessed him. She would not have stayed if she thought him weak.

Bella. She was as psychotic as anyone in history. Though not evil necessarily, she was twisted in ways that Muggles couldn't even begin to fathom because of her time in Azkaban. She said that she saw things that weren't there and claimed to hear voices in her head and at every moment, she was moving. If not exactly dancing, she was always moving...and it was to a rhythm that only she could hear. He had always been able to bend her to his will before, though he silently acknowledged that it was becoming harder to do. The thought of replacing her was hard, because she was useful in any

number of ways, including when he needed to 'persuade' recalcitrant followers to do his will. When the mood struck her, she was a sadist such that even the Marquis de Sade himself would be terrified.

As the morning sun began to filter through more and more of the stained glass that filled every upper window, a man walked the length of the Great Hall and, when he made the first step that led up to the dais, he fell to one knee and bowed. "My lord" he said, "Our forces have swept the country. There was no resistance at all. We are now in complete control."

Riddle's voice was low and sibilant as he said, "Very good Rookwood. I am very pleased. I would never have believed that we would achieve this much, this fast. What of my followers in Azkaban?"

"All released, my lord. They are all recovering now and will be well enough to be here in a week's time. They are ready to pledge their loyalty to you once again, my lord..."

"As well they should, Rookwood. I would have all my followers assembled as soon as possible. There is still much to do."

"Yes, my lord... but there's more, my lord..." Rookwood was trembling, even though his master had just expressed confidence in what he had done so far. He knew he had to convey the next bit of news... but he didn't know what the cost would be. But it was better, he knew, to tell the truth straight out than have it ripped from one's head by his lord. "Master, please... the next bit of news is harder. I swear on my life it is not my fault."

"Out with it then, Rookwood. I will judge whose fault it may be."

"My lord, we have taken the country.... but most all of the Ministry employees fled, taking their most precious secrets with them. More, all of the mudbloods and half-bloods have fled. Magical villages everywhere are empty. All the stores in Diagon Alley and Porpington Square are empty and the Goblins have fled, taking all the money with them. There is not a witch or wizard within a hundred miles of here, in any direction. Lucius was wrong. We have won the castle and the Ministry, but at the cost of having no one to rule and no money to spend." "Bring me the fool. I will have his hide for this." With that, Riddle stood and strode off, alone with his thoughts, leaving Rookwood to his unenviable task.

Bramblefree Castle; Isle of Man, UK – just after lunch, July 8, 1995

Albus Dumbledore wondered how he, at age 167, could have been forced into having to lead such a ragtag group such as those who were assembled around him in the castles' 'grand hall'. It wasn't Hogwarts' Great Hall by any means, but it was large enough so that all of those who had escaped from the Ministry ahead of Riddle's forces could meet all at once. There were more than two thousand who had gotten out, not including the Aurors who were left and those Unspeakables who were willing, for the sake of the cause, to be seen in public. Leading the forces of the Light, no matter how high or exalted a calling, was a game for the young. Specifically, it was the role for which he had intended to groom Harry Potter – before the boy was ultimately sacrificed to 'the cause' for the greater good. Now HE and not Harry, was in the unenviable position of having to organize and control a very, very dispirited and disgruntled group of witches and wizards. The Unspeakables and Aurors he knew he could lead and motivate – because that was a part of their culture. The rest, however, were a much more difficult challenge. Most of them were just rank and file clerks, 'assistant-ministers', 'deputy-assistant ministers', and others. Most of the ones he recognized had been graduated from Hogwarts. As he looked around, he hoped that there were going to be enough of them that he might actually be able to put together a fighting force. He knew, or at least thought he knew, that Riddle didn't actually have that many people under his banner. They controlled through fear, intimidations, and violence – tactics which tended to magnify their 'apparent' strength in the eyes of the public. He would have to counter those tactics if he was going to have any hope of regaining control of the mainland and restoring back control of Hogwarts.

Finally, Albus realized what he really had to do. Fighting was not the answer... at least not immediately. "Ladies and gentlemen, the nightmare that we thought had put behind us forever has come back to our shores. Tom Riddle - Lord Voldemort" There was a visible

shudder as he said the name "has returned in full force. All of you know that he is in control of the great and magical places that we have loved and claimed as ours and that we cannot return to our homes and businesses until or unless he and his minions are defeated." A wave of reaction ran around the room that he had to wait out before he could begin again. "Yes, yes, I know. It is a painful and frustrating reality. Some of you are separated from your families even now and cannot be reunited with them until this war is over. I cannot tell you now when that will be. I will, however, tell you that we have things going for us and that ultimately, we will win!"

Giving rousing speeches was not something at which Albus Dumbledore excelled. However, he knew he needed to give those standing before him the one thing that they didn't currently have... and that was hope. Waving his hand, a large map of England appeared over their heads, so that all could see it. "However, we cannot hope to fight Tom right now. There are not enough of us who are trained to fight to take back and then hold onto the all of the places that we had called ours. So, what we are going to do is melt into the muggle population. There are over sixty million Muggles living in the Kingdom.. We will be the trees hiding in plain site in the forest. We will train and learn in small groups until we are all ready for the challenge that lies ahead. We will meet in groups of no more than four or six at a time, so that our movements cannot be tracked easily and we don't arouse suspicion... and then, when the time is right, we will meet here again and take back what is ours." Dumbledore emphasized each word, putting as much of his own magic into them as possible, so that every person present would believe him and do what he suggested. It was a technique he had long employed to make recalcitrant teachers 'toe the line' and it usually worked. He continued, "Those of you who are muggle-born will have no problem with this. Those of you who are not or are from mixed families...we will help you disappear into Muggle society, either here in the Kingdom or somewhere on the Continent. We will keep our heads down and wait for our time. We CAN rebuild and we WILL rebuild... but now we must be quiet and patient and protect the secrets that we have."

The rest of the meeting was organizational... and had a subtle but definite feel of defeat to it. Dumbledore wished it weren't so, but he knew that it was much preferable to pushing people into the breach when they weren't ready. He knew that doing so would have resulted in a needless slaughter and though he knew that Harry

ultimately had to die in order for Riddle to die, he didn't relish the idea of wasting thousands of innocent lives for no reason.

At one point, while the room was alive with small discussions, the aged headmaster pulled one of his favorite allies aside. Casting a privacy bubble around them, he said, "Kingsley, I have a job for you. It's something that must be done, but cannot be done by me, for obvious reasons."

"I'm yours, Albus. What do you need me to do?"

"Have a conversation with someone who could be a very, very strong ally...if we give him the impetus and sufficient information to act..."

When Albus told him, Kingsley smiled a broad smile. "I've always wanted to see his office. I'll do it."

"Good then, my friend. Perhaps you can convince him that he needs a new body-man as well?"

Kingsley's smile in response was enigmatic.

At the end of the meeting, Dumbledore stood one more time, lifted his hands so that they were facing palm-out and said, "Merlin willing, we will all see each other again. As you go now, remember that we are only as strong as we are united, as weak as we are divided. Lord Voldemort's gift for spreading discord and enmity is very great. We can fight it only by showing an equally strong bond of friendship and trust. Go now and be safe."

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Office of the Prime Minister of England, No. 10, Downing Street, July 9, 1995, 8:35 AM.

John Major was a man who had just squeaked out from between a rock and hard place. His battle to remain leader of the Conservative Party, less than a week earlier, was still fresh in everyone's minds. Though he was still trying to consolidate his power, things were looking up.

He had forced an early election under the party's modified 1975 rules and was still trying to make sure that John Redwood and those who supported him couldn't threaten his position any longer. The upside of having done so was that even his most ardent critics had to admit that he had pulled off a stunning victory, in the midst of what looked like a potential political disaster.

A report from MI-5^{3/4} - Directorate F – his country's most secret department. It was coded "Top Secret. Most Critical. UK EYES ONLY. Your Eyes Only" and was the last thing he needed. "Top Secret" was the classification for those things that could "Threaten directly the internal stability of the United Kingdom or friendly countries or lead directly to widespread loss of life" "Most Critical" meant that the information contained was the most sensitive information possessed by the government; "UK EYES ONLY" meant that it was not to be shared with the Americans, unless not sharing was deemed to be a threat to the nation's very survival, and "Your Eyes Only" meant that not even the Deputy Prime Minister was allowed to see the information the report contained. The report itself went on for more than one hundred pages and included three appendices.

As he read, one thing struck him more than anything else. There was a nascent civil war happening on British soil about which, until very recently, he had known nothing. If his magical counterpart, Amelia Bones, had not made contact with him prior to abandoning her position, he might have been caught completely off-guard by the report that he was holding in his hands.

"...More than eighty thousand British witches and wizards have left the country since June 19, 1995. A confidential informant, who cannot be identified, despite thirty (30) separate attempts to identify her, stated that Albus Dumbledore, the (now) former Headmaster of the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has led a group, not thought to number more than two thousand (2,000), into hiding.

We have separately confirmed that the threat identified as no. 0011, Thomas Marvolo Riddle, aka 'Lord Voldemort' - see enclosed biography - (born London, UK, 31 December 1926) has returned to the Kingdom and is now in control of Magical Britain. He was thought killed on October 31, 1980, but our informant has provided concrete and irrefutable proof that this threat has been 're-

incorporated' by use of ancient ritual magic (see appendix no. 1, "Types of Magic")

The Prime Minister read for another twenty minutes and as the minutes ticked by, he realized that even with all that Amelia had told him, there were so many things that he still knew too little about. A psychotic murderer running around in the north country, with an army of over two thousand killers, was not what he was expecting to have to deal with immediately after his re-election. He decided that he had to have a face to face with the mysterious John Avery and that he probably ought to have General Sir Charles Guthrie, his Chief of the General Staff, attend the meeting.

Picking up the phone, he went to call his executive assistant when a powerful-looking black man, of middle to late-middle age, suddenly appeared in the room. The two members of the Specialist Protection detail drew their weapons and were getting ready to kill the intruder when they were struck by two red beams of light and dropped to the ground like sacks of rice.

"Easy does it, Mr. Prime Minister. I'm not here to hurt you. My name is Kingsley Shacklebolt and I was sent by Albus Dumbledore."

"Thank God. Finally, someone who can give me some answers."

Shacklebolt looked at the two guards and quickly changed what he was wearing to appear as though he was just another guard. With another flick of his wand, the two guards' memories were modified. A third flick and they were both awake and looking around, wondering why they were sitting in the Prime Minister's presence. "Easy boys. You've both been on your feet too long. You passed out at almost the same time. I've ordered that you both be sent home for forty-eight hours' rest. Your colleague here has volunteered to take over."

The two guards looked very, very sheepish. With a wave of his hand, the Prime Minister dismissed them. "Right now. Go on, then. You'll not do any more good here today. I expect to see you at the week's end, refreshed and ready to go."

They both nodded and left the PM's office. giving Shacklebolt a chance to speak one-on-one with his assignment. When the door

was fully closed, the Auror observed, "Very good, Mr. Prime Minister. That was deftly done."

Major smiled. "One of the things that you learn when you're trying to get here: how to soften the blow or ease someone down when their ego is on the line."

"Not a skill I've learned, I'm afraid."

Waiving a hand casually in the direction of the near his desk, he "Sit. I have a lot of questions for you. I have a report in my hands that says you've a madman running around in the north country by the name of Riddle, or Voldemort if you like."

Kingsley swallowed hard. "Yes, sir. He's taken control of Hogwarts and his forces overran the Ministry for Magic in central London several days ago. Those who are still loyal to the elected government got out just ahead of them and have decided, for the interim, to blend into the Muggle population and disappear, until such time as we are strong enough to take him on. Right now, unfortunately, we have no idea when that might be."

The Prime Minister sat down hard and looked at the tall black man. "Are you telling me that a psychotic murderer is likely to be in charge of the magical areas of Britain for the foreseeable future?"

"Yes sir, I am."

"And you're also telling me that there is nothing that can be done about it?"

"Yes. And no."

"What do you mean by that?"

Shacklebolt twirled his wand in his hand absentmindedly as he thought about how much he could tell the Prime Minister. As if he could see the hesitation in the younger man's eyes, the Prime Minister said, "Tell me everything. That's an order."

The senior Auror – a law enforcement officer with more than twenty-five years of experience, looked at the senior-most politician in the Kingdom and said stiffly, "You can't order me to do anything, Prime

Minister. My oaths are to the Ministry for Magic and to the International Confederation of Wizards and they are magically binding. If I violate them, I will die. So, I will tell you as much as I can and you will have to be content with that."

Major leaned back, deflated, and said, "Well, use your magic and get me a brandy. I suspect that this could be a long conversation."

Shacklebolt chuckled, took out his wand, and did as bidden. It was going to be a long conversation, for sure, and the Brandy would help.

With a snifter of Brandy in hand and the report in the other, Major said, "Alright. Tell me as much as you can about this Riddle fellow and what you think I should do about him. Then I want you to tell me about how British magical society is structured. After that....well, we'll see what else I need to know."

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Note – chapter seven will be delayed by about a week. I have to complete Chapter 91 of VC:Rebirth and that is going to take time. Thank you for your patience!

As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

From Chapter Six: "When castles fall"

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La Dolce Vita du Cote d'Azur – Sunday, July 16, 1995 – sunset

Merced tore up the pillows that had been layered carefully and artistically around the palatial room, in hopes of finding something, anything that might give him a clue as to where Minerva McGonagall had gone. This room was the most recent in a long string of places that had come up empty for him and he was beginning to grow weary of the chase. No one had ever eluded him for this long before. It was as if Minerva McGonagall had just up and disappeared off the face of the planet the night that she had absconded with the book and records. Albus Dumbledore had paid him to fetch them back for him and so far he was coming up short. It infuriated him and ate at his confidence. "Stupid bitch can't have gone that far. She's got to

be somewhere on the continent" he thought as he made one last inspection.

Closing his eyes, Merced reached out with his senses and tried to 'taste' whatever magical signatures might still be lingering in the room. It was a peculiar talent – one that, in combination with his extensive training, made him a renowned and successful bounty-hunter. He quickly found that the Deputy Headmistresses' signature was nowhere to be found. It led him to believe that she had never been in the room at all and that perhaps he was being led blindly down a primrose path, in order to throw him off her real destination. But where? Where would she have gone? The Headmaster was certain that she had not left magical Europe and that she wouldn't, because she had family scattered all over. However, he had already 'visited' all of the foul woman's relatives and not one of them had seen her in more than six months' time. If she were hiding at any of the locations, he was sure that she would have been sussed out by his talent, Fidelius charm or not. Slowly spinning in place, Merced focused on his private office/training area, and disappeared with a moderately loud crack! It was time to re-think his entire pursuit-strategy and broaden the search area. To do so would take time and planning...and would eat into both his patience....and more importantly, his profits.

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Private residence, Prime Minister John Major – 10 pm., Sunday, July 16, 1995

"For the last time, Michael, no. I cannot tell you what you want to know, even though I do want to. You deserve to know."

"John, if this is a states' secrets issue..."

"It is, but there's more to it, Michael. I wish I could tell you more, but I can't. It's my life if I do. Please, understand, this is not something I anticipated."

"Is there anything you can tell me?"

"Yes. I can tell you that there is a civil war going on right now and it will be all our lives if I can't stop it."

The about-to-be-appointed Deputy Prime Minister stopped dead in his tracks. There was only one civil war that he knew about to which the Prime Minister could possibly be referring. "It wouldn't have anything to do with a certain castle in Scotland, would it?" he asked carefully.

It was John Major's turn to be flabbergasted. "How did you know that?" he said; his voice now trembling.

"My nephew is a wizard, John...and the only war that I know is going on centers on a certain castle in Scotland."

"You better get over here, Michael. Right now. I'll have someone there momentarily to get you. He's a wizard, too, and now my chief body-guard. His name is Kingsley."

Listening to the Prime Minister's end of the conversation from a few feet away, Kingsley Shacklebolt knew that he had just been asked to go get the soon-to-be Deputy Prime Minister from his home and bring him back. Closing his eyes, he focused on the large foyer of Heseltine's Buckley Hill Lane home in Sefton and in an instant, was there. Taking out his wand, he looked around. "Point me" he said quietly. The wand spun in his hand until it pointed to about 270 degrees – roughly left of where he was standing. Turning carefully, Kingsley entered the broad hallway which seemed to run the length of the home and walked until he heard a man's voice.

"Your man hasn't shown up yet, but I'll call you back when he does. I assume he's coming by apparition?"

Stepping into the well-appointed study, Kingsley said, "Yes, he is". Heseltine almost dropped the receiver the moment that he heard the older Auror's voice. Somehow he managed to say, "Never-mind. He just arrived."

Putting down the phone with a shaky hand, Michael Heseltine still had the presence of mind to check out the tall, handsome black man. He noticed that Kingsley wore a solitary earring in his left ear. Not many men in England had either the style-sense or the dignity to successfully carry off the look, but it seemed to suit the man well.

Proffering his hand, Kingsley introduced himself. "Kingsley Shacklebolt, pleased to meet you."

Heseltine did the same. "Michael Heseltine; pleased to meet you as well. You're the former Auror that Dumbledore assigned to John?"

"Yes sir, I am. Albus felt that the Prime Minister needed someone nearby who knew about magic and might be in a position to defend him if things went pear-shaped."

"Ready to go? John seemed to think that time is of the essence."

Kingsley nodded. "You might want to consider leaving your wife a note to tell her that you've left for London and you won't be back for a day or two. I don't know how long the PM is going to need you, but I fear that there is a great deal for the two of you to talk about."

Heseltine nodded and walked over to his desk, to write the suggested note. After two minutes, he appeared to be satisfied and then walked back to where the former Auror was standing. "Take my hand, sir and hold onto me. I'm going to apparate us directly to the PM's office. It will feel like you're being squeezed through a tube for a moment, but then everything will be back to normal."

The older man took the Auror's hand and felt the sudden, sick sensation of being turned inside-out.

A moment later, the two re-appeared in the private study of the Prime Minister; right about dead-center in the middle of the carpet that bore the seal of the republic. The chill of the transition faded and Heseltine found himself staring at the Prime Minister. "It's a hell of a way to travel, isn't it?" he asked.

"Not something I'd ever get used to, that's for sure" he said, before moving to shake the PM's hand. "I'm glad that I could get here. We've a lot to talk about, apparently."

Instead of saying anything, John Major thrust a report into Heseltine's hand. "Read this and then tell me what else I need to know. Kingsley here is bound by oaths of loyalty that can't be broken, but I suspect that you're not."

Flipping through the first few pages of the report, once past the index, the Deputy PM didn't say anything in response immediately. Instead, he stood and read; his expression growing more and more

worried. Finally he looked up, closed the report, and said, "It's everything we've worried about since 1980, John. With Voldemort or Riddle or whatever he's being called now, in control of both the Ministry for Magic as well as Hogwarts, the magical world in Great Britain might as well no longer exist. Riddle doesn't have the forces to take on the Muggle world and he knows it. Nor does he have the power to go after our friends on the continent. The problem is that he's a psychopath and a megalomaniac and that makes him unpredictable. The last time he tried to take over, he was temporarily killed by Harry Potter. Now Harry's bailed out and taken all but the pure-blood families with him out of the country. If it's true that the Goblins have closed up shop too, then Riddle has no one to finance his army and no ability to feed his troops. That leaves him in a fairly desperate situation and we both know what desperate men are capable of doing. We need a plan."

Major inclined his head in silent agreement. "That was my take as well. However, with Harry Potter gone and Albus Dumbledore gone to ground, I'm not sure where to start."

"Prime Minister, if I may?" Kingsley found himself saying, before he remembered that he wasn't a decision-maker and didn't have a say in things, really.

"What is it, Shacklebolt?"

Realizing that he had overstepped his boundaries, but not knowing what else to do, he said, "I think that you are going to have to talk to the ICW."

"International Confederation of Wizards", Heseltine said, before his PM could ask the obvious question. "It's the international governing body, not unlike the UN in New York, which governs all wizarding matters, world-wide. They're mostly charged with protecting the International Statute of Secrecy and making sure that all member-countries abide by whatever rulings are handed down to further the statute."

"Can they do anything to help us?" Major asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Don't know. However, they have no love for dark lords of any sort, as they tend to create problems which threaten the statute. They

were preparing to intervene militarily the last time Riddle became a problem and almost did, until Harry somehow destroyed Riddle."

"How do we get to them? Kingsley?"

"Don't know, sir. Albus would know, since he's the current Supreme Mugwump of the ICW"

"The what?" Major asked, not believing what he had just heard.

"The Supreme Mugwump, sir. Like...chief warlock if you will. He sits as the chairman of the council and leads the meetings. He's due to step down in three years' time, but right now, he's the one in charge. It's one of the reasons that Riddle wants him dead."

"So, if I wanted to speak to them, what would I do?" the PM asked.

"I would arrange it with Albus, probably. I don't know when the next meeting is, but I'd be surprised if he couldn't call an emergency session."

"Then do it."

Kingsley smiled. "Want to watch it happen?"

"You don't have to do anything dangerous, do you?"

"No sir. It's just that you've never seen this kind of magic performed before and I thought you might like to."

Heseltine was also intrigued, as his nephew had never had the chance to do magic in their home before, because of the Reasonable Restriction on the Use of Underage Magic – which he didn't think was reasonable at all – but couldn't do anything about.

Taking out his wand, Kingsley smiled for the first time and then pointed at an open space towards the middle of the room and said, "Expecto Patronum!"

A huge, almost-solid, silvery giraffe appeared in the middle of the room. It was breathtaking to look at and both the PM and the Deputy PM were completely goggled over it. Kingsley was immensely proud that he could conjure a fully corporeal Patronus, when so many

other witches and wizards couldn't. He loved the feeling that it created in him and delighted in the fact that it looked so much like the giraffe that he and his family had once had as a pet in his native southern Tanzania, when his father was appointed as the magical protector of the Ngorongoro in the early 1950's.

Communing with it for a moment – which looked to the PM like he was nuzzling a pet or something – Kingsley made his Patronus circle the room once and then go on its way to Albus Dumbledore.

Both Heseltine and Major watched as the silvery beast melted through the far wall and disappear and both were left wondering privately how non-magicals could ever hope to stand up to power like that.

"For what it's worth sir, what you just saw me do is something that Riddle himself cannot do."

That startled the PM. "Oh? And why is that?"

"Because sir, Riddle is, for lack of a better way to say it, purely evil. A Patronus, which is what you just saw me summon, requires that the witch or wizard concentrate on the most loving, wonderful memory that she or he has ever had. In other words, a Patronus is the purest expression of the most strongly felt positive emotion that one can have. The ability to cast a Patronus is one way we are able to assure ourselves that those who work with us against Riddle are still pure of spirit and are on our side. If you can believe it, Harry Potter's Patronus is a thousand times stronger than mine – and he's only fifteen. That's why he's the most powerful wizard alive right now and not Dumbledore...and that's also why Riddle is so afraid of Harry."

Major looked relieved. "It's good to know, Kingsley. Now, I imagine that Michael and I have a great deal left to talk about. Why don't you kip off for a while and get back here fresh in say six hours?"

The ex-Auror thought about that and then nodded his acquiescence. "I'll be down the hall if you need me" he said, before moving towards the door.

As he walked out, two heavily armed and armored SAS officers moved into the room and took up stations on either side of the

doorway. It was one of the changes that Major had instituted after his first conversation with the ex-Auror. The dragon-hide vests that the officers were wearing under their bullet-proof clothing were part of a set of six that were being rotated through the new protective detachment that guarded the PM. The officers had been told that the vests were a new type under development by the US Secret Service and that they had already been responsible for turning back much higher-caliber bullets than the standard vests could. The soldiers, for their part, were pleased that they got access to the very best that was on offer and wore the vests happily. The last thing that Kingsley did before turning in for the night was to seal the room magically against apparition and port-keys. There was no way that he wanted an uninvited guest dropping in during the middle of the night. Once the charms were in place, he laid back and was asleep almost as fast as his eyes closed.

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The Horse and Groom Pub, Epsom Road, Gilford, UK - 12:15 am – Monday, July 17, 1995

The Horse and Groom Pub was a notorious hang-out for all sorts of layabouts and assorted riff-raff, as well as the occasional Vagon, and so the two men who sat in the back, corner booth were, for the moment, reasonably inconspicuous. The notice-me-not charms with which they deflected the more curious, albeit inebriated bar-patrons, were the only telltale indicator that the two men were more than they appeared to be.

One clutched his single-malt scotch as if it were going to be his very, very last drink while the other attempted to make short work of the small bowl of semi-stale pretzels. They had been talking for more than an hour when, in between pretzel bites, the slightly taller man said, "C'mon, Albus. Surely you're not going to try to string me along with that cock-and-bull story. I've seen through your machinations for years and it's obvious that you're up to a great deal more than you're saying. I mean...this bullshit that you've been feeding everyone about how Minerva betrayed you, is really, really beneath you. No one buys it and frankly, it's making you look both stupid and pathetic."

Albus Dumbledore looked at his brother with something akin to hurt in his eyes, but it lasted only a minute.

"Oh stop it, Albus. That 'wounded puppy' look doesn't fool anyone. You're no more hurt than I'm the PM. If this is the shit you tried to pull on Minerva, I'm pretty sure that she was right for leaving."

For a moment, Albus thought about going for his wand, then decided against it when he felt the tip of his brother's wand poking him in the leg. Aberforth Dumbledore's tone was low and threatening. "Don't even fucking try it, Albus. I can shoot under a table just as well as I can above one. I know your tricks and I plan on walking out of here alive, with my brains and thoughts intact. In fact, hand over your wands, both of them, right now."

For a moment, Aberforth really thought that his brother was going to be stupid enough to try to go for it and he cursed himself for not having more room in which to operate. His years as an Unspeakable made him wary of not having full and complete control of the situation.

Finally though, Albus Dumbledore handed over his wands. When he did, Aberforth looked at them. He noticed immediately that Dumbledore's old wand – the one he took from Grindelwald – was gone. His eyes flicked up at his brother's face and he could see that there was genuine anger in his brother's eyes. "Lose your wand somewhere, Albus?"

"Yes, damn you." "What could ever have happened to separate you from your unbeatable wand?" the shorter man said with barely disguised glee.

"Potter" he said, half-choking on the name.

"What's that, Albus? Are you admitting that you were beaten by your own precious weapon? Is it possible that he finally caught on to your manipulations? Be still, my heart!"

The elder Dumbledore's eyes had lost any twinkle they might have had and his face had taken a very hard edge. It was all the proof that Aberforth needed to see. His taunts were finally getting to his brother and after all that Albus had done to those whose lives he had destroyed – always for the 'greater good' – Aberforth felt well-pleased.

"Are we done?" the disgruntled, former headmaster asked.

"Yes, we're done. However, I have one thing that I must do before I take my leave." Wondering what further abuse his brother was planning on bestowing, Albus Dumbledore watched in horror as his only living sibling snapped the more powerful of his two wands cleanly in half and dropped the pieces on the table. "That's so you can't go around with a sneaky back-up. The other one I'll leave outside the Pub."

Albus looked murderous. "You son of a bitch"

Aberforth stood and looked down at his only brother, smiling. "I'm not the goat-fucker in the family, Albus, you are. However, that's neither here nor there. The important thing right now is that you better hope that Riddle gets to you before Potter does, because once he finds out the complete truth of what you've done, you'll be grateful that he can kill you only once."

"You'll get yours" Albus snarled as he started to stand.

Seeing the former Unspeakable's only partially hidden wand come up level with his chest was enough to dissuade him from trying anything physical. Aberforth was not afraid of using the Cruciatus Curse, especially since there was no longer a Ministry for Magic around to prosecute him for doing so, and Albus knew it. "You killed Ariana, and for that you I hope you die painfully. She was my best friend and I loved her more than you can imagine. When your day comes, I'll take comfort in the knowledge that your pure-blood arrogance has finally come back to bite you in the ass." With that, Aberforth Dumbledore turned and walked out of the pub; closing the door behind him. He chucked his brother's remaining wand into the bushes to the right of the entrance-way before disappearing. If he was lucky, it would take his brother the better part of an hour to find it and if he was really lucky, it would take him all night.

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Vermont Studio Center Johnson, Vermont - Saturday, July 29, 1995

Elias Ollivander looked about his new shop and wondered if he hadn't accidentally stumbled over one of the best locations ever for someone in his line of work. Not only were there wood-workers of

every type around, but there seemed to be an almost endless supply of powerful magical woods with which to work.

The shop itself was nondescript, a 15' x 25' room with a 10' ceiling, but the location within the complex was utterly amazing. The morning sun filled the bay windows of his new shop and warmed the back of the shop every evening. Plus, the mountain breeze brought nothing but positive energy into his shop as he worked. As he walked around the shop, he thought about his 'old' layout in Diagon Alley and whether it was practical or not to re-create it.

Looking at the high ceiling, he realized that he had a great deal of space to work with and that with just a little bit of tinkering, could actually give him two full floors – one for storage and the other for manufacturing and sales. Pleased with the idea, Elias Ollivander began to lay out, in his mind's eye, what the shop should have for a front/sales section. Not much to that, he realized. A couple of high bar-stools so that students who were being measured could sit up straight; a bench so that other customers could wait comfortably, and a long wooden counter so that customers could put packages down while they paid for their purchases. He also had to have a place where he could conveniently place his cash-register and his secure money-till.

Smiling, Elias walked outside to the large, sorted pile of dried boards to start picking the wood that he would need for his renovations. The sun was shining in a cloudless sky; there was a cool, refreshing breeze blowing across the mountainside, and he knew in his heart that it was going to be a very, very good day. An hour later, Elias Ollivander, who had quietly fled the United Kingdom - the only home he had ever known - and come to the United States not five weeks earlier, was once again a very, very happy man.

He stood amidst sorted piles of long, solid planks, as well as several solid, completely dry blocks of various woods and reveled in his good fortune. The other artists at the colony had gathered together all of the dry woods that they didn't need or thought he could use and had silently and wonderfully presented them to him as a welcoming gift. Their note, which had been strategically placed on top of one prominent 8' x 12' x 12" board of Cherry, had told him that all the wood in the pile was his to use as he saw fit and that they all – all sixty-five of them - wished him the very best with his shop. It

had been a long time since he had interacted with Muggles and he found the experience to be quite refreshing.

These weren't British Muggles, but rather Canadians and Americans who had gathered together for the purpose of creating art – both (static) visual and performance-based – without regard to the background or upbringing of the artist. He was also delighted to find out, as he had the night before, that they even considered good cooking to be art and did it with the same passion that they did everything else.

Facing away from the sun and just about to start bringing wood into his shop, Ollivander was taken aback by an almost completely corporeal Patronus in the form of a Scottish highlands wild-cat that made its way between the carefully stacked piles; coming to rest at his feet. There were less than a dozen wizards and witches in all of the British Isles whom he knew to be strong enough to create a truly corporeal Patronus and he had committed all of their forms to memory. The one standing in front of him belonged to the extraordinary witch, Minerva McGonagall. "What have done, Minnie?" the old craftsman thought to himself, as he carefully reached out to touch the waiting Patronus.

"Safe. Need to know where you are. Cherry blossoms are out. Reply soonest" the Patronus said into his mind, the moment he touched it. Suddenly, dormant memories began invading his consciousness.

"Cherry Blossoms" was the trigger-word; known only to those within the mysterious 'Order of the Phoenix'. It allowed him to remember that there were others who were also prepared to fight against 'he-who-must-not-be-named' – Thomas Marvolo Riddle, a/k/a 'lord Voldemort' - and who had also taken oaths to act in the defense of the people of the United Kingdom, Muggle as well as magical. Minerva McGonagall was the head of the Order, if Albus Dumbledore was unavailable, dead, magically compromised, or captured. Using the activation words meant that Dumbledore was, most likely, dead. Somehow, the thought didn't bother the man that much. However, it did mean that he had to reveal to Minerva the secret that he and Albus had been guarding for more than ten years.

Taking out his wand, the wondrous magical craftsman summoned his best, most powerful memory and said "Expecto Patronum!" Ollivander felt the backwash of warm, happy love as the hugely

oversized, silvery Bowtruckle emerged from the tip of his wand. The happy, magical tree-sprite touched its forehead to his and then turned and began running down the side of the mountain, leaving a wispy, silvery trail in its wake. Elias watched as it disappeared into the distance. Looking around, Ollivander decided that there was no time like the present to get organized. Hearing from Minerva had changed, in an instant, all of his priorities and made him think about all of the things that he might have to do in order to help Harry Potter and those who had pledged to help him to defeat Riddle once and for all.

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Manor Delacour, Forêt de Meudon, just east of Le Route des Bois Plantes; Meudon, France – Sunday, July 30, 1995 – just after dawn

The patter of small feet in the second-floor corridor signaled the start of another day with the hundreds of refugees that the Delacour family had taken in and it seemed to Fleur Delacour, as she quietly made her way to the first-floor kitchen, that they were going to have to find a way to relocate many if not all of their guests sooner than later. It wasn't as though they weren't welcome – because the guests they had taken in were both respectful and helpful in the extreme – but it would be nice to have the privacy back that they had once enjoyed.

The sun was just beginning to filter through the tops of the taller, thornless blackberry-bushes that lined the back of the garden and it casts a particularly gorgeous greenish-yellowish haze through and around the bushes. Fleur stopped and took a moment to take in the sight as she stepped into the manor's large, main living room; smiling softly as she did so. There were so many memories that had from growing up in the home and a great number of them centered on the blackberry bushes. They had provided a sanctuary of sorts when she was young, because she could hide under the bushes' shady, full canopy and not be found for hours. The bushes had also always been an enormously convenient place to snack on summer afternoons, when she was hungry after playing all morning with her sister and her friends. Fleur wondered if her daughters would ever have the chance to do the same thing or if the war that threatened to destroy wizarding England would spill over onto the shores of France. She prayed that it wouldn't and that her father and those

who worked with him would be able to contain the problem before that happened.

Letting the peace of the scene fill her soul, Fleur thought about all the things that she was going to have to do before the morning was over. There were more than four hundred and seventy-six people, beyond those in her immediate family, who needed help. Food, shelter, clothing, advice, and contacts within the wider European community were tops on the list. She also wanted to make sure that for the children among the refugees, there was sufficient schooling offered so that the children didn't fall behind magical children everywhere else who were in structured classes. Her mother, Aimee, would contribute all that she could and she knew that her father would do the same, in terms of connecting the refugees to other families and magical communities in France and elsewhere on the continent. Once enough connections were made and firm commitments to help were obtained, the refugee families could begin leaving the Delacour estate. There was a long way to go though before that point was reached, she knew, and she prayed that her inner reserves would hold up.

"Blossom?"

Fleur turned around, her train of thought broken by the soft, gentle voice of her mother breaking the peace that the sun's first rays had brought her. "Yes, mother?"

Moving in close so that she could hug her daughter, Aimee Delacour savored the chance that she had to hug her elder daughter. There weren't enough chances to show her daughter just how much she loved her and so she took them when she could. "What troubles you so that you're up this early?"

Leaning her head against her mother's shoulder, Fleur thought about it before saying, "Lots of things to do, mother, and I worry....I worry about Harry and the others. Ever since daddy brought word that he's fled to Canada, I've worried that I'm not doing enough to help him. I know that you'll try to tell me that I'm doing quite enough here...but somehow, I don't think I'm doing enough to help prepare for what's coming."

Aimee Delacour wasn't sure how to take her daughter's admission. On the one hand, she felt pride in her daughter's straight-forward

statement and on the other; she worried that her elder daughter might be lost to the war that they all knew was coming.

"I love you, Fleur" her mother said softly, "and I know that Harry and his friends affected you more than you've let on..." Aimee paused, unsure about she should phrase her next statement. "Your father and I are concerned about whether you really understand what might happen if war comes to the UK. The refugees that we're helping are only the first part of what might happen."

The young, stunningly beautiful one-quarter Veela turned and said, "Mama....please.....If I'm right, Harry's going to need all the help that he can get. You said it yourself – I'm a fully trained witch now. I'm not the simpering young woman that I was and I have to do my part. Besides, I owe Harry a life-debt, as does Gabrielle."

The older Veela looked like she had just been slapped. "Mon Dieu! Why did you not tell me!"

"Because I didn't think that it mattered until just now!"

Grabbing her daughter's petite wrists in her strong hands, the older, taller woman spun her daughter around so that she was forced to look up at her. "How did it happen? TELL ME!"

Gathering her magic, the younger witch pushed her mother back hard, so that her wrists were free and she was no longer being forced to look up. She did it so fast that her mother had no chance to prevent it from happening.

Aimee Delacour was caught off-guard and was therefore unable to prevent her daughter from breaking free. By the time that she thought to try to recover her control, she was staring down her daughter's already-drawn wand. "Don't mother. You know I can't talk about my life debt, or Gabrielle's. I don't like being controlled and I'm no longer a child that you can just order about."

Aimee Delacour's posture sagged as she realized that she wasn't going to be able to force her daughter to talk about anything that she actively chose not to talk about. Finally, she gave up and said, "I'm sorry, Fleur."

Lowering her wand-tip slightly, Fleur said, "It's alright, Mama. I understand why you're concerned. You just ought not be, that's all. It's not as though I'm rushing out the door to go join Harry. Part of me wants to very much, but another part knows that my duty, at least for right now, is here."

Aimee looked at her daughter and realized that perhaps she didn't know her as well as she thought. She wasn't expecting to hear about 'duty' and the girl's sense of place. For a moment, she hesitated to speak; wondering what she ought to say or what she ought to ask of her elder daughter. It came to her, after a moment, that she might not be the one to draw out of her all that the young girl had to say. "Fleur....I think that maybe you ought to talk to your father. You know he loves you..."

The tears that welled up in her daughters' eyes were proof enough that she had hit it right. Jean-Sebastian had always had a powerful connection with his daughters and truly loved them more than any father Aimee had ever seen. Anyone who knew the family knew, because they had seen it, that both of his daughters responded to that love in amazing ways. When Fleur was able to brush away her tears, she said, "I will, Mama, I will."

With that, Aimee turned and left the room quietly, so as to give her daughter some peace and solitude before the day truly started.

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Early afternoon on Monday, July 31, 1995 - Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc, 50 Km. north of Trois Riviere, Quebec, Canada; 8 km. east of Saint-Gérard-de-Laurentides

Harry Potter felt as free as he ever had as he bounded through the woods; hot on the heels of his one true love, Hermione Potter. They had chosen to take the day - Harry's fifteenth birthday - off to play and be together, after more than fifteen straight days of hard study and work. Running was one of their forms of play and both were loving it.

Hermione, for her part, had had enough of her books and was quite happy to be with the man she loved more than life itself for the day. It was not the typical way to celebrate a birthday she thought, but it was what he wanted and so she was at peace with it. Her pace was

fast as she leapt from log to log in the forest and ran like a rabbit through the clear patches.

"Catch me if you can!" she yelled, as she bounded over a particularly long pine tree that had obviously fallen over within the previous year.

"Run Luke, RUN!" Harry yelled playfully, quoting one of their favorite movies, as he moved with incredible grace along an intersecting path, off to his wife's right.

Far above them, flying unnoticed at more than one hundred feet, two of their soon-to-be professors from L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec watched as the amazing couple ran along the forest floor. Neither could believe the ease of movement that the two showed and each wondered what the upcoming semester had in store for them.

Hermione thought she would make the designated finish-line with time to spare over Harry when she was suddenly bowled off her feet by her leaping, laughing husband.

"Harryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!" she screamed as she found herself flat on her back, with her husbands' face within inches of her own.

"Got you" he said as he grinned and lowered his mouth to hers.

"Oh yes....but I've got you" she said silently into his mind, as her hands wrapped around his back.

"You always have had me, love" he replied into her mind as his lips covered hers and the two ground themselves against the other.

"Make love to me?"

Harry replied by reaching down between his wife's legs and caressing her sex through her running shorts and knickers. She arched her back, trying to press against his hand.

"Oh god yes, Harry. Don't stop!"

Harry's hand slid under the waistband of her running shorts and into her soft, cotton knickers before he plunged two fingers deep into her sex. "Cum for me" he whispered into her mind as his lips ravaged hers and his other hand held her close to his body. They were both hot and sweaty, but at the moment, it didn't matter. There was a special passion and Hermione was grateful that there was no one around to disturb them.

Thirty or so minutes later, Harry Potter lay in a lazy stupor on the forest floor, a soft, transfigured blanket beneath him, with his wife lying naked and asleep on his broad, muscled chest. The forest was quiet; its perfect peace disturbed only by the song of Chickadees as they flitted from branch to branch.

His thoughts were wandering pleasantly as he felt Hermione's warm breath on his chest. So much had changed in so few months that Harry could scarcely believe it. He and the woman that he loved were safely away from the civil war that had come to the shores of his native country; his friends and his godfathers were safe, he was the sole heir of one and a half massive fortunes, and he and his wife were going to attend a fabulous school of magic.

High above them, the two professors let their brooms drift close together so that they could talk and not be heard.

"So it's true, Alcide"

"It appears so, Isabelle. The boy certainly looks like the pictures."

"What about the girl?"

"Don't know, though I assume...."

Isabelle grinned. "I bet I know exactly what you're assuming, Alcide. Did I ever tell you what a dirty old man you've become?"

The older man laughed, which caused his broom to shake a bit under him. "Yes, many times, Isabelle. I don't suppose you want to go down there and get a better look?"

The young Canadian Auror-turned-defense professor laughed. "No, I think not. If that young woman is someone he cares about and not

just a passing fancy, I think he might be understandably unhappy about my 'taking a look'."

Despite his somewhat raunchy outlook on life, Alcide Bertrand was a fairly cautious man and genuinely respectful of and caring towards the students in his care, even if he let the occasional lewd comment slip in front of his peers. He knew from the limited information that he had been given that the young man lying on the ground one hundred or so feet below him was not a typical young man and that he came from an entirely different background. He knew too that there were some pretty potent rumors floating around about the young man and that if even a few of them were true that he wasn't someone to annoy needlessly.

"You're a good woman, Isabelle. Do you think we've seen enough?"

The young, extremely attractive French-Canadian Auror nodded. "Yea, I think so. If he really is Harry Potter, then I think it best that he not know we've been here. Let's get back to the school and get in contact with the godfather and see what more we can get out of him. I don't want to start a class not knowing everything I can about someone who might in fact be more powerful than me."

The Muggle-born, nuclear-chemistry-professor turned potions-master looked at his lithesome flying companion and said, "I know the feeling."

Side by side, the two pointed their brooms east and south and took off; leaving the sleeping couple in peace.

The sun was beginning to fade in the western sky when Harry Potter felt his wife shift position on his chest. Craning his head so that he could look around, he realized that while they were still alone, there were shadows beginning to form in the forest and that it was probably time to get going homewards. "'Mione? Love?"

Hermione Jane Potter, still naked from their earlier lovemaking, snuggled closer to her husband; her ponytail off to one side and her arms intertwined with his. It was obvious to Harry that she was feeling content with the days' activities and didn't want to move, but he knew that the forest would be cold at night and that they owed it to both Sirius and Remus to return by nightfall. Both men would be

worried about them if they didn't and Harry didn't want to have a confrontation with them for no good reason.

It was easier just to pretend that the two men had at least a modicum of say in when Harry and Hermione came and went. Reaching down her body with his somewhat free left hand, he clutched her bottom gently and tried to caress it in such a way as to wake her up pleasurably.

Soon, his fingers were exploring the sensuous cleft of her arse, pushing down towards her nether hole and then further between her legs, towards her wet sex. It didn't take long for her hips to begin to push down against his body, in that special way which is unmistakable. It was a good thing that just being in the same province with her was enough to bring him to full hardness, because he knew that he was going to have to wake her up in a more deliberate manner.

Slipping his hard manhood inside her sex, Harry pushed up with his own hips and buried himself inside her in one thrust. Her eyes snapped open and she looked at him with both surprise and undisguised pleasure.

"Oh! Oh yes!" she said as she kissed his face and pressed her cheek against his. "Now that you're awake, let's try this my way" he said into her ear as he flipped them over and thrust into her again. "Oh God, Harry! That's it...fuck me!" With her legs wrapped around his back and her heels digging into his arse; encouraging him, Harry thrust himself into her again and again. "I love you!"

Harry kissed her as he leaned into her; reveling in their coupling "Oh God, Harry....I love you. Don't stop!" Even if he wanted to, there was no way that he could because the pleasure that he was feeling was so intense. As he looked into her eyes, he felt his magic growing; surging out in all directions. Hermione's magic was doing the same and together, their magic coupled for its own wild, untamed dance into the heavens. There was nothing to stop the two from becoming one, again and again, or to stop their magic from doing the same. The only difference between the two was that while their magic might have gone on forever, Harry could not.

Soon, the joyous pleasure of filling his wife again and again was more than enough to make him roar out his climax and fill her with

hot, sweet seed. When they were done, Harry stretched out and lay on his wife, before rolling the both of them onto their sides. "I can feel your cum inside me, Harry" she said into his mind. "I wish we could be working on making a baby right now."

Harry shared her wistfulness and gently replied, "I know, love. I know. I want it too. Soon, I hope. I can sense some things are coming together that will let us go home and make lots of babies together."

"I feel it too. Wish I knew why, but I feel it. Things are happening out there."

"If I didn't know that there are real prophecies, I'd think we're nuts....but you're right. Things are happening. I just wish that I had a stronger sense of how it will all happen."

Hermione let her laughter fill his thoughts. "Why do you think I dropped divination so fast? Most all of it is nothing but prattling nonsense and the stuff that is real is so hard to figure out. But, you're right. We've got to go with what we feel, because we know that there are real prophecies."

"Do you think we'd have had all this happen if there hadn't been a prophecy about me?"

"No, probably not. But, you never know. Something else could have happened or we could have discovered your heritage another way and that might have led us here....hard to say."

They leaned in and kissed and let their minds drift off for a few minutes; savoring the afterglow of their lovemaking before Harry said, "We need to get home. I promised Sirius that we would and I'd not like to disappoint him."

"I know. Let's clean off and get dressed and we can apparate back to the car. I'd like to stop at Traiteur Outre-Mer on Sainte Foy before we head home, so that we can get some plain crepes for tomorrow morning's breakfast."

"Yum. Good idea. Sounds better than anything Sirius might fix up. He's a horror in the kitchen."

Hermione grinned at her husband's observation, because she knew it to be true. Sirius had never been forced to cook for himself nor anyone else and so his entire repertoire in the kitchen consisted of not-quite-burned toast and poached eggs. She hoped that Septima would be able to do something about that problem, but she wasn't willing to lay a wager on whether it would happen in the near-term.

A half-hour later, Harry and Hermione walked out of the forest hand-in-hand across the gravel parking lot where their rental car sat parked. Hermione was glad that Harry had not insisted in purchasing a car once they had decided that Quebec was where they were going to stay, at least for the coming school-year.

It was one less thing that could be traced back to them and therefore made hiding that much easier. She explained, patiently, that a competent bounty-hunter could use public records to find them and that paying cash for all transactions made such a person's job that much harder.

Once he understood what she was trying to get at, he had quickly agreed to most of the limits that she set for them. Just days after that conversation, though, and with the help of Gringotts-Toronto and the kind word of Ragnok as support, he was able to create a work-around by creating a completely separate identity – that of "Harold Evans" – which he then funded using some of the monies from his Gryffindor inheritance.

Since only he, Hermione, Neville, his three wives, and a very, very select handful of others knew about his standing as Lord Gryffindor, it was the safest way to fund a new identity. Neville, on Harry's suggestion, did something similar for himself and for his three beloved wives, so that they could move about in Muggle society without attracting unwanted attention.

Driving turned out to be a great deal of fun for Harry and he enjoyed getting behind the wheel and exploring the area around Quebec City. It was a truly beautiful area with many fewer problems, as well as people, than Boston or New York might have offered. Hermione was just as happy to sit back and leave the driving to Harry, since she had a truly awful sense of direction.

Her mother had taken the time to teach Harry how to drive as an early present and he had learned all of the basic skills seemingly

overnight. Since his 'cover' identity came with a Quebec driver's license which said that 'Harold Evens' was 18 on the 31st of July, Harry took full advantage of it.

Once they were headed towards the city, Hermione asked aloud, "What are we going to do if we can't find the other Horcruxes, Harry?" It was the first time she had brought up the subject since Minerva McGonagall had sat them both down, along with Remus and Sirius, and told them about the other artifacts which she, Filius, and the house-elves had destroyed at Hogwarts before abandoning the school.

Harry thought about it for a moment and then said, "I don't know, love. So far, they've accounted for the diary – which I destroyed – the Tiara, Riddle's school cup, and she said that Helga Hufflepuff's wand is probably another. Minerva said that she'd try to find Ollivander and get that one back, so that it can be destroyed. That means we've accounted for four out of the six. If Filius is right in what he told Minerva and Riddle's snake, Nagini, is the fifth, then we have to account for only one other. If we find that one, then we'll have it all wrapped up and Riddle will be mortal again."

Reaching out, Hermione took Harry's right hand in hers and held it; letting her thumb softly trace the back of his hand. After more than a minutes' silence, she said, "And then we'll go and kill him once and for all?"

Harry shook his head. "I don't think it's going to be nearly that easy. First, we have no idea how many followers Riddle has currently; secondly, we don't currently have anything like the kind of forces it would take to dislodge him from Hogwarts, if he's seized the school and can control the wards, and third, even if we had the manpower to do what needs to be done, I'm not an adult and it's going to take someone whom everyone respects to lead such an attack. I'll be there at the end, of course, because I have to be, but that doesn't mean I'm going to be able to do any of the stuff that would get us to where we need to be in order to take Riddle on without having our side massacred."

Hermione thought about all of what Harry had to say and then nodded her agreement. "So, what are we going to do?"

"Lay low. At least for the next year to eighteen months - we're going to just lay low. Everyone who matters to us got out of the country safely, either with us or shortly thereafter, which means Riddle has no leverage over us at all. He can go after neither your parents nor your grandmother, and he can't go after any other Muggles in a meaningful way without violating the International Statute of Secrecy, so he's basically stuck. Dumbledore has retreated for the time being, so we don't have to worry about him being a problem....so I'm thinking we enjoy the school year and learn and study as much as we can and not worry over the things about which we can do nothing."

As much as doing nothing sometimes infuriated Hermione, Harry's plan sounded much more reasonable than she might have ever thought possible. He had assessed the situation accurately and had laid out for her why he thought that doing nothing was the best course of action. He didn't have to mention the upside – which was that they would have at least a full year together, studying, learning, and loving each other before anything could be done about Riddle and his followers.

They talked as Harry drove and soon they were inside the city limits. Navigating the often narrow streets took some careful driving, but Hermione wasn't worried. Harry was as careful in a car as he was on a broom – at least when he wasn't chasing a snitch - and so she laid back and let him find a parking spot not too far away from the Crêperie. Dusk was a thing of the past and the stars were out by the time they were parked and he indicated that it was time to get out and walk.

"You're too good to me, Harry" she thought to him as he took her hand and led the way to the restaurant.

"No, I'm not, but I love you for thinking that I'm good to you." He squeezed her hand gently and pulled her closer. "Thank you for today....it was wonderful."

Hermione leaned into him and started humming happily. "I know. I loved it too. Now let's go. I want to get the crepes and get home." Taking her hand, Harry led her down the street to the crepe shop and wondered, as he did so, what things would be like in a year's time. He hoped that they would have the freedom to follow their dreams.

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Hogwarts School – just after dusk – Tuesday, Aug. 1st.

"Rise, Lucius, and tell me why I should not kill you."

Lucius Abraxas Malfoy rose to his feet as calmly as he could.

The confrontation that he had feared was finally before him; life or death, depending on how well he could explain to his lord why he had done what he had done. "My lord. I am your man. I always have been. We have a very hard situation all around us and I won't lie to you, I am uncertain. However, my lord, I am a Malfoy. If my actions displease you, I will die like a man." Voldemort considered what his right-hand had said. It was courageous, to be sure.

The question was whether it was what he wanted and had ordered. He knew that he wouldn't waste his servant's life needlessly. "Continue, Lucius. Your courage pleases me." His urge to run was almost overwhelming, but there was a part of him that truly wanted to impress his master and earn praise for what he had done.

"My lord....what I have discovered is what you already know – which is that we have a huge labor problem. There are about twenty-three thousand pure-blood families left here in the kingdom and approximately twenty-three hundred house-elves to serve those families. However, house-elves don't grow food or do many of the other menial tasks that are necessary for the adequate functioning of a society."

Voldemort interrupted him with a dismissive wave. "You are seriously trying my patience, Lucius. Rookwood has already told me much of this and I find myself annoyed at both your delay in returning to my side and in your failure to warn of these consequences. I do not suffer failure in my chief lieutenant well, Lucius." His voice was low and menacing.

"My lord! I know I have been away and I know that I resisted Rookwood when he came for me. I didn't have a choice. You expect solutions and that is what I was determined to bring you. I have that solution now and if you allow me, I will tell you what I can do and what I want to do, with your support."

The dark lord dropped his hand away, palm up, in a gesture that told him that he should continue.

Swallowing hard, he steeled himself and continued. "Thank you my lord! I promise that this solution will work and will get us to where we need to be." A voice in the back of the hall muttered only semi-audible deprecations; causing the dark lord to lift his wand in a casual way and send a hot, dark curse towards the source. There was a sudden scream and then silence. "Continue, Lucius. You will not be interrupted again."

"Thank you, my lord. As I was saying, what I am proposing is that we import from Eastern Europe and the Russian republic, a number of squibs to come and serve the families here. There is a slavery bonding ritual that can be used to bend a squibs' will to the person who has the correct control mechanism. I have refined the ritual so that it will allow a witch or wizard to control up to three individuals at a time. I believe that given our numbers – approximately 23,400 people – a total of 5,850 squibs or one for every four people - would be needed. Fortunately, there are easily twice that many currently working in the countries I have researched. The crucial thing that works to our advantage is that in most of the countries, squibs have no legal standing, so there is nothing standing in the way of our carrying this plan through to completion." Voldemort looked at Malfoy thoughtfully.

"You forget, Lucius, that we are having something of a money shortage right now. How do you propose to solve that?" It was the question that he had been expecting and the one for which he had the most satisfying solution.

"My lord! I have discovered where they dwell and I have recruited a team to send them a visitor. A most satisfying visitor, my lord!"

"Oh? Do tell, my slippery friend".

"The king of the serpents, my lord. I found a very, very old one living in a cave system in France and I have arranged for a team to go and immobilize it and bring it to the home of the Goblins. It will 'greet' them, my lord, until they accede to our demands."

For the first time, Voldemort smiled and Lucius Malfoy felt as though he might just have a chance to survive the encounter. "You surprise me, Lucius, and I like this kind of surprise. If only all my servants showed the kind of dedication that you have today. I can see that I was hasty in sending Rookwood to 'collect' you. Perhaps it is time to give you a greater hand in executing my overall plan."

Falling to both knees, Lucius could feel the relief flowing through him. "I'm not worthy, my lord, but....thank you." "No Lucius, perhaps you are not, but you are more worthy at this point than any of my other followers, save for Bella, and she serves me very differently than you do. I am well pleased with this plan. Go forth then and work my will." Rising, Lucius finally dared to look up and meet his masters' gaze. What he saw was a confusing mix of madness and satisfaction and it left him shaken as he made his way out of the hall. It never occurred to him he might not be the only one to see the madness in his lords' eyes.

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

From Chapter Seven: "Movements in the depths of Summer"

For the first time, Voldemort smiled and Lucius Malfoy felt as though he might just have a chance to survive the encounter. "You surprise me, Lucius, and I like this kind of surprise. If only all my servants showed the kind of dedication that you have today. I can see that I was hasty in sending Rookwood to 'collect' you. Perhaps it is time to give you a greater hand in executing my overall plan." Falling to both knees, Lucius could feel the relief flowing through him. "I'm not worthy, my lord, but....thank you." "No Lucius, perhaps you are not, but you are more worthy at this point than any of my other followers, save for Bella, and she serves me very differently than you do. I am well pleased with this plan. Go forth then and work my will." Rising, Lucius finally dared to look up and meet his masters' gaze. What he saw was a confusing mix of madness and satisfaction and it left him shaken as he made his way out of the hall. It never occurred to him he might not be the only one to see the madness in his lords' eyes.

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Office of the Headmistress, L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec,
Wednesday morning, August 2, 1995

"NON! Je ne me soucie pas qu'il prend; ils doivent avoir la meilleure sécurité possible. FAITES-LE ARRIVER! MAINTENANT! "(NO! I do not care what it takes; they must have the best security possible. MAKE IT HAPPEN! NOW!")

Madame Thésèse Renaude Lapointe, grand-daughter of Louise-Marguerite-Renaude Lapointe, who was the first French Canadian Woman to hold the position of Speaker of the Senate, put down the phone in her office and looked at her guest and her two professors. Alcide Bertrand sat to her visual right while Isabelle Gatineau sat across from him. Between them sat Lord Sirius Black.

"Lord Black" Madame Lapointe began.

"Sirius, please" he said, waving his hand as if to wave off any thought that she might have had that there was a need to be formal with him.

"Thank you, Sirius. Please call me Thésèse" she said, emphasizing the name, as if it were spelled Tear-ace.

"Thank you, Thésèse. I want to begin by thanking you for agreeing to see me on such short notice. I know that both Isabelle and Alcide were anxious to have me meet with you, give the current situation. I thought it best if we moved as quickly as possible towards getting 'on the same page', as the Yanks like to say."

Nodding a little bit, the older woman looked at him. "I thought so too, Sirius. Your two charges don't seem at all worried about security, or else you've devised a way to protect them that I'm not seeing."

Sirius laughed for a moment; something that almost sounded like a bark. "I suppose Thésèse that their lack of care might seem unwarranted or unreasonable, but I can assure you that Harry and Hermione spend the better portion of every day in intense magical and physical training. What Isabelle and Alcide here saw was not the norm, but rather the exception. It was, after all, Harry's birthday and I could hardly impose on him to study and train that day. He's been extremely diligent and I'm very proud of him for what he's accomplished since we left England in June. Hermione, too, has achieved a very grate deal and has made amazing strides in improving her magical abilities as well as her understanding of the principles and theories behind the application of magic. I would not be surprised if she sat for the ICW N.E.W.T.s and aced them right now. That's how much she's progressed. So, in answer to your particular question, I wasn't at all fussed about them taking a day to themselves. What neither Isabelle nor Alcide saw were Harry and Hermione's offensive capabilities. I doubt very much whether either of them would be much of a match for either Harry or Hermione right now."

That brash statement made the Headmistresses' eyes go wide with surprise. "Really" she said, in a 'I'm-pretty-sure-I-don't-believe-you kind of way.

"Really. Of course, both Alcide and Isabelle are welcome to test them any time they like. Remus Lupin and I are quickly getting to the point where we're out-classed by either or both of them and that's saying a fair bit. I would welcome a chance to see someone else get beat up on for once."

Thésèse looked at her defense professor and said, "Well? You willing to take on either or both of them?"

For her part, Isabelle Gatineau was feeling her oats as she smiled at her Headmistress. "Sure. I think I might have a few surprises for them that they're not expecting."

Sirius smiled. He had talked with Harry and Hermione about the possibility of a challenge and they had both ratified the idea – so he wasn't giving away the store by proposing it to the Headmistress. None of the Hogwarts professors were any challenge for them except Minerva McGonagall...and both Harry and Hermione thought that she only beat the two of them because "McGonakitty" was a sneaky bitch who was far too good at battlefield transfiguration for their liking.

"When then?" Sirius asked.

Isabelle looked at their guest. "Day after tomorrow? I have a free afternoon and we could do it out on the Quidditch pitch."

"Who'll referee?" Alcide asked politely.

"We have an internationally-certified dueling master with us. Would he be acceptable?" Sirius said.

Isabelle knew that she'd not find anyone fairer than that, so she immediately acceded to the suggestion.

"Good then. That's settled. Now, let's talk about what your charges need from us. I understand that they would have been going into their fifth year at Hogwarts, but I get the sense that they're already very far ahead of where they'd otherwise be because of what they've been doing this summer."

"That's the issue, really. Hermione will be 16 in September while Harry just turned 15. Hermione had access to a time-turner in her third year so she could complete some advanced course-work, so she's actually about nine months ahead, physically, of where she would otherwise be. And....there's one other thing that you should know, that Alcide and Isabelle haven't told you, which they probably don't even know."

Thésèse looked at him, noting the concerned tone to his voice. "What's that?"

"Harry and Hermione are married."

To say that the room suddenly fell silent was somewhat of an understatement.

"They're WHAT?" the Headmistress said, fairly exploding with the words.

"Married."

"Lord Black, I think you need to explain yourself, or else I will think that this is a joke in very poor taste."

Sirius reached into his jet-black, acromantula-silk dress-robe and gently took out his wand. He held it up so that the three people around him could see the glowing tip. "I, Sirius Arcturus Black, swear on my life and on my magic, that Harry and Hermione Potter are husband and wife, and have bonded their souls together in magic ritual. So Mote it be."

When he didn't fall over dead from a false utterance, the Headmistress nodded and then said, "Alright, so you're telling the truth. Tell us what got these two precocious students to this point and what you want us to do about it."

For the next twenty minutes, Sirius told them about the confrontation with Albus Dumbledore; the resulting division of forces, and the trip to both Gringotts and then to Neville Longbottoms' estate. Though he skipped over a good number of the details, he tried to hit the high-points; all the while reinforcing the picture of Harry and Hermione as a truly bonded, loving couple. He talked about James and Lily a bit and pointed out how Hermione had almost single-handedly kept Harry alive through four years' worth of adventures. When he was done, he looked at the two professors and the Headmistress. "Questions?"

Almost a minute passed by before Professor Gattineau looked at him and said, "You said that this fellow, Longbottom was it? That he has three wives?"

Sirius smiled a small smile. "Yes. In England, well...in magical England, the pure-bloods never did away with polygamy. I suppose

that it was partly because the men were always being killed off and there was a genuine imbalance between witches and wizards which could be solved only by allowing polygamy, since the laws prevented witches from owning or controlling property until the turn of the 20th century. I also think, though I can't prove it conclusively, that the more powerful the wizard, the more likely it is for him to attract more than one witch and there was no real reason to prevent such a wizard from doing so. Neville is insanely powerful – which is why he has three wives - but lacks the control and finesse, for instance, that Harry or Hermione have. Harry is even more powerful than Neville, but you'd not know it until.....well, it's too late for you. I would not be surprised if he's more powerful already than Dumbledore...and that's something that I never, ever thought I'd say. Harry's not taken another wife, and probably won't ever, because he's so insanely and totally in love with Hermione and because he puts her first in all that he does."

It was the Headmistresses' turn to interject. "You mean that we're also going to have to contend with Mr. Longbottom and his three wives, on top of trying to accommodate Harry and Hermione?"

"Well, yes and no. Lord Longbottom has sufficient resources that he and his wives could hire private tutors if they wanted. However, for reasons known only to Harry, it's probably best that you do try to find a way to accommodate Neville and his wives. I'm not necessarily talking about housing them on campus, and I can think of a half-dozen reasons that you might not want to do that, but you would probably want to make room for them in classes."

Thésèse shook her head. Things were getting more complicated for her by the moment and it was starting to make her head spin. There were an incredible number of details to be worked out before the start of term and she had an ever-decreasing number of days in which to do so. 'Je deviens trop vieux pour cette merde' she thought to herself. ('I'm getting too old for this shit')

As if he could read her mind, which he could because of his studies in passive legilimency, Sirius said gently "If it helps Thésèse, Harry and Hermione already know how to apparate – though I know that it's not strictly legal for them to be doing so – and they can live off-campus as well. They'll always have at least one body-guard with them during the day and most of the time it will be a very, very special young woman by the name of Nymphadora, who's a

Metamorph. 'Nym' is an Auror and can protect them while they're at school, as well as serving as another wand in case trouble comes looking for Harry."

As if he had said the magic words, both professors and the Headmistress herself began questioning him about what he meant by 'in case trouble comes looking for Harry'. By the time he was finished answering all their questions, two hours had passed and almost the entire story regarding Tom Riddle, a/k/a 'Lord Voldemort' had come out. It left the three wondering why they had ever complained about their lives and just how amazing Harry Potter must be to have survived all that he had experienced.

The meeting finally broke up, with mutual promises of more conversation in the days to come and a better understanding on both sides of what each could do for the others. At just after three pm, Sirius Black dragged himself back to the townhouse which he and Harry had bought together; feeling like he had just gone through a marathon session of the Wizengamot or had survived several days' worth of the N.E.W.T's – where he had been the one being examined – rectally.

Collapsing on the sofa in their spacious living-room, Sirius Black let his mind wander as he felt the tension from the meeting start to flow out of him. It had been a good meeting he thought, and it made him feel like he was doing something that a father would do for his son...and that, all by itself, was the most positive, wonderful thing that he could feel in the moment.

It didn't take long for Sirius to fall asleep and when Harry and Hermione found him an hour later, they found that Sirius had reverted to his animagus form, Padfoot. It was an unbreakable, life-saving habit that he had picked up while in Azkaban. As they stood to one side of the sofa, looking down, neither had the heart to wake him, even though they were really curious about his – meaning Sirius' meeting – with the Headmistress and what was going to happen to them in less than a months' time. However, their curiosity could be put off, since a sleeping Sirius also meant a vulnerable Sirius.

"We really shouldn't" Hermione thought to her husband, though the tone of her 'thoughts' lacked any sort of strong conviction or feeling. She wasn't dumb. She knew a good set-up when she saw one.

"Awwwwwww. It will be fun. Besides, it's payback for what he did to us last week!"

"Ok, but nothing painful", she acquiesced.

"Nah, I'd not do that to him. However.....watch this" Not bothering to take out his wand, Harry conjured a bunch of elaborate white-and-pink bows and proceeded to attached them in ordered rows up Padfoot's tail. For good measure, Harry tied a larger pink bow around Padfoot's neck and then wandlessly summoned some of the less-than-ideal perfume that Septima had deliberately left behind (during her last purse-clean out) on the counter in the downstairs loo. Standing back, Harry silently went about his work before standing and showing it off to Hermione - who grinned and summoned her new digital camera. Harry's work was something that definitely needed to be memorialized.

As they made their way up to their bedroom for a kip, Harry and Hermione shared silent thoughts about what was going to happen next and what life might have in store for them....and how long it would take for Sirius to realize that he had been pranked, once he woke up.

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46 Trinity Church Road, just off Wyatt Drive; West London, UK

11:15 PM, Sunday, August 13th, 1995

The quiet street was dark, as the moon was beginning its waning phase. The sweet smell of Honeysuckle and Clematis hung in the night air and there were buzzing insects all about. The pretty, high-end Muggle neighborhood was walking distance from Harrods Village and a stone's throw from the west bank of the River Thames, and as such, a perfect place to hide. At least, that was the idea.

The resistance cell that met at this particular location was known only to those who absolutely needed to know and even then, the secret was protected by a modified Fidelius charm – one that protected the nature of the meeting and the group, but didn't hide the existence of the house itself, because it was already known by too many people and couldn't be 'called back'.

Making his way towards the pretty, two-story townhouse, Alastor "Mad-eye" Moody, the aging ex-Auror, cursed Bellatrix LeStrange yet again for all that she had done to him during their last encounter. Walking was a significant challenge for him because of the miserable, psychotic bitch and no matter what he did to try to cushion the stump, it always hurt. This night was no different. However, he was still alive, in one (relative) piece; and had been able to retire to the Bordeaux region in France because he was so paranoid.

Two hundred yards down the darkened street, another man moved silently and swiftly; preferring to move in the shadows as much as possible, so that he was harder to see. He wished he could see more, but the night-vision goggles that he had with him were useless with the amount of moonlight that the area was enjoying, so he had no choice but to move closer to his target.

When he was within a hundred yards, he stopped, crouched down, and waited. One thing that he had in his 'goodies' bag was a standard parabolic dish and unidirectional microphone, that could be used to pick up sounds from as far away as a thousand yards. Fitting the cordless earplug that went with the unit into his left ear, the man listened for voices. Finally he was rewarded for his patience, as his target made it to the door of the suspected safe-house.

The agent watched as his target took out a long, thin stick – which he knew to be a wand – and then tapped the door in a precise pattern. A minute or so later the door opened and another, taller, red-haired man appeared and said, "What happened to you in Harry's last year?"

"Ah, Arthur, you would ask me that. Ok, so I was captured by Barty Crouch Jr. and kept in the bottom of my own trunk for nine months."

The man smiled and then said wryly, "Constant vigilance, Alastor"

"Constant vigilance be damned tonight, Arthur. My stump is hurting something fierce and I've got to get off it for a while. Let's get inside."

Not wanting to move, the MI 5-¾ agent took out a small pad and pen and began making notes, using the LED which was piggy-backed onto the pen as a source of light. It was visible at a distance of no

more than five feet, so he knew that his movements could not be seen from his target's location.

After no more than three minutes had elapsed, lights along the street started going out, one after another. The agent watched in fascination as the bits of light seemed to fly into the hands of a man who had suddenly appeared on the street, as if out of nowhere.

Once all the lights were out, it was safe to switch to his night-vision goggles on their lowest-power setting. It was amazing, the agent thought, to be able to watch magic in action and more amazing still to be completely unseen by that same magic.

Albus Dumbledore stood alone on the completely darkened street, wondering if he had done enough to mask his arrival and whether the Muggles in the area would realize that there were no street-lamps lit along their street. Given the time of night, he thought that they probably wouldn't, but he wanted to make sure. Taking out his third wand – since his first two had been lost to him, he cast a series of Muggle-repelling charms along the street and on No. 46 itself, so that no Muggle would have any interest in going near the house for at least several hours.

Though the young agent knew what was happening intellectually, he couldn't fight against the gut feeling that the old mans' magic produced that told him that he had no further business in the area and that he had to leave immediately. Getting up from where he had been crouching, James Leyland Kell, grandson of Vernon Kell the famed MI-5 agent, moved down the street with roughly the same care that he had used not twenty minutes earlier when his target entered the now-confirmed safe-house.

"One down and god knows how many to go" he thought to himself as he made his way towards his pick-up point.

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46 Trinity Church Road, 11:45 PM.

Inside, away from prying eyes, the "leaders" of the resistance were meeting. There were fourteen people packed into the living-room, twelve men and two women, and each had things that he or she wanted to say and have heard. Everyone could tell that Albus

Dumbledore was angry, for it was etched deeply in his expression. Gone entirely was the jovial grandfather with the twinkling eyes. It had been this way since early July and most attributed the changes to Minerva McGonagall's departure.

Arthur Weasley looked towards the center of the room and saw that the case of Butterbeers that had resided on the coffee-table in the middle of the room was half-empty and the two salad-bowls of pretzels were almost empty and he made a note to have something more on hand the next time the leadership met – whenever that turned out to be.

Molly Weasley, one of the two women in the room, looked across to her husband and tried to catch his eye, but was blocked by Mad-eye Moody, who had suddenly appeared right in her line-of-sight. It was frustrating for her, as she thought that she needed to get him to go and get something more to feed their guests. She also wanted him out of the room when she tried to pigeon-hole the Headmaster about Harry and her husband would be nothing but a distraction from her efforts.

Arthur listened to the chatter around the room and was trying to decide where his loyalties truly lay. While he was a pure-blood and would do anything to protect his family's name and honor, he was beginning to see how destructive the pure-blood agenda truly was. It had reduced wizarding Britain to two sides, one entrenched in Hogwarts Castle, lacking the ability to feed, clothe, teach, or reproduce and the other, hiding out amongst the Muggles; dependant on Muggle homes and Muggle technology just to survive. Each of the wizards or witches present was only able to be present for the very reason that he/she had retreated into Muggle society and was living on funds taken out of Gringotts-London on its very last day of business before the Goblins closed up shop and left the country. It was a sad state of affairs.

Dumbledore had promised each and every family that none would suffer during their time amongst the Muggles, but it was clear to the Weasley patriarch that there was no way that the famous 'leader of the light' would be able to make good on that promise over the long-term. Living as a Muggle was far more expensive than Arthur had imagined and he knew that there were others in the room who had come to the same conclusion. Arthur was lucky that he was a reasonably good enchanter and could transfigure regular, ordinary

bituminous coal into diamonds, which he had done twice since the first of July, and luckier still that he had found a way to sell them to squibs who ran otherwise reputable Muggle jewelry stores for Muggle cash. The whole idea made him smile and he thought, somewhat to his sad chagrin, that Harry would have been proud of him for having learned how to deal with Muggle money so fast.

"May I have your attention, please" Dumbledore finally said, as he moved to the center of the room. The others in the room began taking seats quietly as the old man looked around. Once everyone was comfortable, he spoke once more. "Thank you. I know that the hour is late, but there are things that have to be done, if we are to have any hope of surviving this siege. First, I want you all to know that while we have not yet made any inroads on defeating Riddle's forces, we have all successfully found places to hide and there have been no losses on our side since last we met. There are 'snatch' teams patrolling up and down the country and they will find you if you mention Riddle's assumed title. If you have to refer to the dark lord, call him Riddle or just 'Tom'. They've not enchanted those names."

"What have you done about Harry Potter?" the other woman – one of Molly's nieces on the Prewett side – said quietly from across the room.

A dark cloud crossed Dumbledore's face for a moment and he scowled. It was not a question that he wanted to answer, of course, but all eyes were on him and it was not one he was going to be able to just sweep under the rug. Finally he said, "I am doing what I can to find him."

"But you have no idea where he is, do you?" the woman persisted.

Albus looked at her and then looked around the room, as if pleading for someone to quiet the woman and stop her from making Harry a front-and-center issue. When no one made a move to silence her, he felt compelled to answer. "No, I don't. He's disappeared."

"What about you, Arthur?" the woman said, turning to look at the Weasley patriarch. "Your family was said to have had good ties with Harry. Have none of you heard from him? I seem to remember that your son Ron was close to Harry at Hogwarts."

Arthur hadn't expected the question and was surprised by it. His eyes flicked across the room towards his wife and saw her cringing. Both of them remembered the disaster that had occurred in the Headmaster's office just after the awful events at the close of the Tri-Wizard Tournament. He looked at the woman – her name was Eloise or something – and then said, "My two youngest didn't part with them on good terms, so no, we've not heard from him."

"That's enough, Arthur. No need to be airing dirty linens here" Albus tried to say calmly.

"What do you mean, Albus? What dirty linens. What games have you been up to?" Things were beginning to fracture and spin out of control and the former Headmaster didn't know what to do. He glared at Arthur and then at Molly before turning back to face the man.

The questioner was a non-descript, forty-something year old man with a significant bald spot, sandy brown hair and a drooping mustache. Arthur had never caught his name and supposed that, for security's sake that it was probably just as well. However, that didn't stop the former Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot (now disbanded) from starting to say the man's name, before being caught up short. Arthur immediately assumed that the man was a former Unspeakable who preferred to keep his name to himself.

"Let's say that the two youngest Weasley children wanted things from Harry that he was not prepared to give and that Harry took it badly, alright?"

Shaking his head, the man looked at Arthur and then at Albus. He obviously knew when he was being blatantly lied to, but decided not to press the point.

Molly, for her part, realized that her niece was going to be all over her like a bad rash for what had just been said and that things might go very, very badly for her within the Prewett family – maybe even to the point of being disowned by the family. That, she knew, could cost her whatever inheritance she might have ever hoped to get, as well as a shot at at least looking at the Prewett family's grimoire.

"Ladies! Gentlemen! Please! Let us get back to the reason that we are here tonight. This was supposed to be an organizational as well

as information-sharing meeting and we have much to accomplish tonight. I know the hour is late, but please...let us not fight amongst ourselves."

There was some grumbling about that, but in the end, the group settled down and over the next two hours, there were productive things accomplished.

When the meeting broke up, at about 1:30 the next morning, everyone looked exhausted. It was decided that, for security's sake, everyone who could would apparate directly from the back yard of the home, rather than walking all the way back to the previously designated apparition point in the river-side park.

Just before he left, Arthur was pulled aside by the non-descript man who had asked the loaded question two hours earlier.

"Tell me the truth, Arthur. What did Albus do?"

There it was, Arthur thought: the moment that he had been expecting. It was time to decide whether he would do the right thing or the easy thing. Somehow, he found the courage to do the right thing; consequences be damned. It was always easier to remember what you told and to whom if what you always said was the truth.

"Just after the Tri-Wizard tournament, we met in Albus' office – right after Harry had been released by Madame Pomfrey. Harry's godfather, Sirius Black, was revealed to the group and took his place by Harry's side. Hermione Granger's parents were there, as was Remus Lupin. Both Molly and I took exception to Blacks' presence – but in my own defense, I didn't know that Sirius had been vindicated and freed by the Ministry the previous June. None of us did actually, except for Harry and Hermione. The whole matter with Sirius' illegal imprisonment had been highly embarrassing to the Ministry, so it had been kept very, very quiet. But I digress." He paused for a second to decide what he needed to say next before continuing.

"One thing that's important was that Severus Snape was also at the meeting. I'll get to him in a second. Anyway, it turned out that Albus had promised Harry to my youngest, Ginny, and Harry's long-time girlfriend Hermione to my son, Ron – I assume as 'rewards' for whatever Albus has told them to do during the school year. Well,

Harry and Hermione both objected strenuously and my children made the mistake of challenging them on the point. My youngest boy was even stupid enough to try to curse Harry; something that Harry could easily have made sure he'd never do again, but didn't. Eventually, Albus interfered and tried to dictate to Harry what was going to happen to him and where he was going to be spending the summer, and with whom he would be spending the summer. Well, it all went down-hill from there. Harry and Albus dueled and Harry won. I don't know what happened after that, because at some point, I was hit with a stunner. When I woke up, Harry, Hermione, Remus Lupin, Hermione's parents, and Sirius were gone. I found out only recently that Snape was killed during that encounter – because he tried to use an Unforgivable on Sirius, apparently."

"So Albus tried to dictate to Harry what was going to happen? I assume that Molly had a hand in it as well? Perhaps trying to get her hands on Potters' money and estates?"

The man's question was spot-on, and Arthur found that he couldn't do anything but nod in confirmation. The next question was the one he was truly not expecting. "So, are you tired of Albus' leadership yet?"

Again, Arthur couldn't do anything but nod. It was exactly how he felt – and how he had felt for some time, without being able to give voice to it. It was almost a relief to be able to express his doubts. Molly was a true believer in Albus Dumbledore and now that he thought about it, he wasn't sure why that would be. Certainly, Albus Dumbledore hadn't done anything to help Ron and Ginny and it was obvious that he had already written-off Fred and George as being lost to 'his' cause....so where did that leave him?

Before he could reply, Molly Weasley found the pair and walked over. She was clearly not happy. "Arthur Weasley, what is the meaning of leaving me standing in the middle of the back yard, alone, without even so much as a 'by your leave'? I mean really. I'm tired and I want to go home."

Arthur looked at her and suddenly realized that he didn't care whether she went or not. "Go then. Not like I'm stopping you." The tone of his voice was cold and edgy. Molly looked aghast.

"Arthur Billius Weasley! How dare you speak to me in that tone of voice!"

It was in that moment that he realized that he had had quite enough of Molly Weasley. "Be Silent, woman!" he said, invoking the Familia Obligata for the first time in their married lives. A shimmery silver, translucent cloud sprang up around the short, dumpy woman and he watched, satisfied, for a moment as she struggled against its hold on her.

Turning back to the short, balding man, Arthur said "I'm sorry for her interruption. She's gotten to be more and more insistent as time has passed. We will have to talk again soon, when I'm not being troubled by family annoyances."

Molly, who heard every word that Arthur said, fumed and seethed inside, but was powerless to do anything about it. Her power-base, which centered on Albus Dumbledore, was largely broken and she wasn't a powerful enough witch in her own right to take on her husband, who was a former Unspeakable. Her sons, Bill and Charlie, had struck out on their own and were as far away from home (and her control) as they could be, while the twins, Fred and George, had taken off with Harry and Hermione – leaving only Ron and Ginny at home. While Ginny was a moderately competent witch, Ron was completely useless to her and any plans that she might have had to establish herself once again within pure-blood circles. Having Arthur turn against her was really the final straw and she knew that her dreams would never be realized – unless she sought out a more powerful person to help her gain the status that she deserved. It set her to thinking...and plotting.

The man smiled a sad, knowing smile at Arthur and then said, "We will meet again soon, Arthur, when you're not being pressed upon so. Until then though, take care of yourself...and watch your back."

Arthur nodded; picking up on the fact that as the man said, 'watch your back', he was looking at Molly out of the corner of his eye. It wasn't a message lost on Arthur that he might very well be 'sleeping with the enemy'.

[illegible]

Bestia Alley, off Diagon Alley, London, UK, Thursday, August 17, 1995, just after 4 pm.

Pacing can do a body good – or not. In this case...not. Having been paid five hundred galleons to hunt down the former deputy headmistress of Hogwarts, Merced had every intention of fulfilling his contract.

Walking back over to his large planning table – the place where he kept all of his bits of information sorted – Merced looked at the pieces of paper which recorded the last known places where he had confirmed that his prey had been seen: Hogwarts, just outside Gringotts, and the footbridge near Bascom Park.

It didn't add up and he growled in frustration as he looked at the sheets. He knew that McGonagall's friend, Amelia Bones, worked at the Ministry, and that Bascom Park was near the Ministry's street-level (Muggle) entrance and he knew that Amelia had disappeared at the same time as McGonagall, but he had no better idea of where Bones was than he did regarding his designated target. It was infuriating.

"Where could they have gone? Neither is in the Kingdom or in Europe...so where are they?" Merced thought as he moved the pieces of paper around, so that he could get a sense of what his target might have been thinking. It was doubly-difficult to suss out where his target had fled given that he knew next to nothing about her. Ordinarily he would have gone over to the offices of the Daily Prophet and asked to see all the previous articles which had mentioned McGonagall in any context and he would have used that to build a profile, but the Prophet was long-gone, as were its records.

The whole situation made him want to start cursing something or someone, but there was no one. Diagon Alley, as well as Knockturn Alley had grown increasingly quiet. The few people he had seen around were those whose wands had been snapped and they had no means of leaving magical London. The only reason he was still in London was that he had had the unusual foresight to lay in a years' supply of food – which was magically hidden and protected and could survive for a good while yet. However, the fact that he had the food laid by didn't stop him from 'considering his alternatives'. Dumbledore was in hiding and there wasn't anything, really, stopping him from packing up shop and leaving like everyone else.

No, the question that 'Merced the merciless' faced was whether his honor, such as it was, was threatened if he decided to pack up and leave. 'But to where?' was the question. He had no ties, familial or otherwise, to pin him down to one spot and his 'business' obligations, such as they were, could probably be executed from anywhere.

Walking across the quiet room – he hated noise of any sort – he picked up a globe that stood on a small oak corner-table and gave it a half-hearted spin. When it stopped, he was looking at North America. The Mexican Baja Peninsula, to be specific. Somehow, the area seemed to call to him and he decided, then and there, that the Baja was where he was going to go. It was a long, long way from Great Britain and its troubles and it was a long, long way from Albus Dumbledore. More importantly, it was a long way from the Dark Lord – who had good reason to have him found...and killed.

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Late morning, Centre Hospitalier Universite Laval; section Magique; Saturday, August 19, 1995; Room 321

The nurse drew back the curtains and looked down at her one patient. Unlike the rest of the hospital, the magical wing was lightly used, as most magical citizens in Quebec knew how to take care of themselves and perform at least primary care for themselves and for their family members. It eased the burden on the hospital and allowed them to take care of only those who were truly critically ill or injured. Her patient was, unfortunately, in the latter category.

Isabelle Gatineau looked up at her from the bed; just barely able to move her head and neck. It was a struggle to do that much and she wondered just where she was and why she was in so much pain. The nurse, a young woman by the looks of her, saw the pain and the struggle and said, "Shhhhhhhhhhhh. It's alright, Isabelle. You're going to be alright. We're trying to knit all of your bones back together and get your magical core back to where it needs to be."

"How.....where am I and how long have I been here?"

Bending over and wiping the sweat off the woman's brow, the nurse said softly, "You're in the Hospitalier Universite Laval. You were brought in on the forth of August. Today is the nineteenth. We didn't know if you were going to make it, initially."

"What happened to me?"

The nurse, her name-pin read "Bethany", said "You were in a sanctioned duel, against a student apparently and you lost. Do you remember any of what happened?"

She nodded as memories started to flood her mind. She had been so cocky! "I was testing a student. It was sanctioned as an 'anything but Unforgivables' duel, so that I could see just how good the student was. He was about to defeat me when I snapped off a curse at his.....fiancé" Isabelle knew that the less that was said about Harry Potter, the better, so she chose the white lie, instead of revealing the whole truth. The nurse shook her head at the stupidity of the whole situation.

"What happened then?" Bethany asked, her curiosity getting the better of her.

"Don't know, really. All I remember is getting hit.....felt like two walls trying to crush me between them. The pain....."

Bethany snorted. "The Pain" was something she understood. She could tell from the patient-chart that when the young woman had been brought in, most all of her bones throughout her body, except for her spine and skull, had been smashed into multiple pieces. It was like she had been put into a massive car-crushing machine or something equally ghastly. It struck her as odd in the extreme that none of her vital organs had been ruptured or destroyed; something that none of the doctors in the hospital had ever seen before, because one almost always went with the other. It was an incredible miracle that she was still alive. It testified to her willingness to live and to the strength of her innate magical constitution.

Putting a gentle hand against the woman's face, Bethany said softly, "You're going to be healed completely, Isabelle, and you're going to walk out of here by the end of the month. You're doing really, really well and we're all proud of you. All you have to do is lay back and listen to the audio-books or the news or whatever. Let your mind wander. I promise, I and the others will do everything we can to make sure that you don't feel any pain and that you get better, ok?"

Isabelle smiled to the extent that she could and then let the pain medication that was already making its way into her system via the I.V. take her back into dreamland.

Down the hallway, near the nurses' station, Harry Potter sat; his face a mask of concern and sadness. There was a momentary spark of hopefulness in his eyes as Isabelle's private nurse, for she was Bethany's only patient, came around the corner and approached him. "She woke up, Sir. I've just spoken with her. She's going to be alright!"

It's odd how humans can both laugh and cry at the same time. In fact, *Homo Sapiens Sapien* is the only species known that can do so and that unique ability was manifest when Harry's expression softened with happy tears as the joyous relief of knowing that the woman whom he had hurt so very badly was going to live. Bethany looked at him and was full of wonder at the person he must be.

Of course, Bethany didn't know that she was addressing the very man who had put her patient in the hospital in the first place. All she knew was that the young man had come into the magical wing of the hospital almost immediately after her patient had arrived and told the administration that there was nothing that he wasn't willing to pay to make sure that Isabelle had the finest treatment available. He had insisted that Isabelle have access to around-the-clock, private care from nurses and doctors for whom Isabelle was their only concern. The costs were astronomical for such care, but the man didn't seem to care at all. In fact, it seemed almost a relief to him that he could spend money that way. Isabelle found it very, very odd...and yet very, very endearing. She had never seen someone care so much. For several days at the beginning, the young man didn't leave her side and was only roused out successfully by a beautiful young brunette who seemed to know what to say to him.

Her curiosity got ahead of her mouth as she watched the young man, with the coal-black hair and piercing green eyes cry the happy tears. "Who are you? Why does this matter to you?"

He looked at her; really, really looked at her, as if examining her soul, before he said quietly, "I'm Harry Potter and I was the one who put her here."

It was a bombshell that she wasn't at all expecting and caused her to sag back against the wall behind her. Suddenly all of the things that Isabelle had told her and that she had gleaned from the chart fit together. Isabelle had dueled not just anyone, but Harry Potter , the Boy-Who-Lived, and had made the mistake of attacking the young brunette who had come to roust Harry out of the hospital after his prolonged stay at Isabelle's side. It didn't take a rocket scientist, as Muggles liked to say, to figure out that Isabelle had made a colossal mistake in attacking the young woman. That meant she was either Harry's fiancé or Harry's wife. Privately, she thought that wife was much more likely, given how protective the young woman seemed to be towards Harry. And hadn't she seen a wedding ring on the girls' finger? Thinking back on it, she was almost positive that she had, though she hadn't recognized it at the time. 'So Isabelle either knew and lied to me, or didn't know and made a mistake' Bethany thought to herself.

Gathering her wits about her, she straightened up and said, "I didn't know, Mr. Potter. Please forgive me for any assumptions I might have made. I didn't realize that..."

Harry waved it off. "It's fine", he said softly. "Just.....don't go spreading it around, ok?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes, Mr. Potter. That much I promise. No one else needs to know."

His shoulders slumped a bit with obvious relief. "Thank you. I don't want any attention or fawning or any of that crap. So, please.....between you and me, ok?"

Harry wasn't at all like what the international press had written about him and she found that he was as shy and quiet as any young man could be. She found some humor in the fact that initially, she had thought him a young man – as in close to 21 years old – as opposed to the fifteen year-old that she knew him to be from the reporting. "You and me only, I promise" she said earnestly.

Satisfied, Harry suddenly turned and started to walk down the hall towards Isabelle's room. "She's asleep right now...." Bethany said as he moved away.

Somehow it didn't matter. Harry was going to see her, with the knowledge that she had woken up and that she was going to live. He could stop wracking himself with guilt and move on. It was a wonderful, lightening feeling and for once, he was very, very glad that he had as much money as he did. Hermione was going to be thrilled, he knew, and so was Sirius. "If only my other problems had this kind of outcome!" He thought.

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Private residence, Prime Minister John Major, Sunday, August 20, 1995 – 11: 15 AM

A proper brunch, at least according to the Americans, was a fairly lavish affair and the idea had somehow been picked up on by the principle chef for the Prime Minister. It was a good thing too, because around the table were fifteen of the country's most important people and they all had considerable appetites.

Lifting up his new, favorite breakfast food – the New England (jumbo) blueberry muffin, John Major looked around the large, patio-table and was well pleased. Not only had he been able to convene the meeting in secret, but he had been able to get twelve more opinions on the awful, new threat to their country's well-being.

Lifting a hand to motion for quiet, the Prime Minister said, "Thank you all for being here. I am glad that we were able to gather you all this morning. I want to apologize to you for the abrupt way that you were brought here, but we – that is to say I didn't feel like there was much choice."

"You could have called first, Mr. Prime Minister."

Major looked down the table at his new Defense Secretary, Michael Portillo and smiled. "Michael, you know as well as I that every phone call I make is logged and would eventually be exposed to the public. In this case, as you've probably guessed, I couldn't. Given the way you were brought here this morning, I would think that you've already sussed out that the world is not the way you thought it was when you first got up this morning."

Laughter made its way around the table at that statement before Major lifted his hand again and said seriously, "As of this morning,

we are at war and I am invoking the Official Secrets Act. Speaking about, writing about, or in any other way communicating about what you learn here this morning will earn you an immediate bullet. Am I absolutely clear?"

The silence that struck the people sitting around the table was deafening – before it erupted in angry, vitriolic yelling, which was calmed only by the sudden presence of Kingsley Shacklebolt and his wand. "For those of you who are surprised by this, I understand and I sympathize. However, I want you to understand that the fate of two worlds depends on your silence – and that silence must continue for the rest of your lives. Kingsley here will now explain why that is. Kingsley?"

"Thank you, Mr. Prime Minister" the former Auror said, coming to stand behind and a bit to the left of where the Prime Minister sat. His voice was rich and had a dulcet quality to it that was like listening to the aural equivalent of chocolate caramel. It was seductive, which worked to Kingsley's advantage.

Taking out his wand, Kingsley silently turned the flowers in the center of the table into a bunch of grapes, then a bunch of apples, and then changed them back into flowers. Then he animated all the forks on the table and made them form a conga-line, which then marched around the perimeter of the table. When he was finished, the forks returned to their places. For a finale, he wandlessly conjured blue-bell flames from the palm of his hand; making the farie-fire do loops around his hand and then dance from plate to plate, in a counter-clockwise motion around the table. By the time he was finished, everyone was applauding wildly. Then he did something that abruptly silenced everyone. He summoned a small frog that was hopping in the garden; causing it to land roughly in the center of the table. "Watch closely" he said. He pointed his wand at the frog and said, "Avada Kedavra!" Instantly, the soul-sickening, bone-chilling green light leapt from his wand, killing the frog.

Everyone, including the Prime Minister, felt the sweeping, evil cold that always accompanied the use of the killing-curse. No one moved. Kingsley vanished the frogs' remains with a wave of his finger and looked at them all. "I hope that I now have your undivided attention. What you just saw was the killing curse. There is nothing, and I mean no power in the world that can stop it, and only one person has ever, in more than two thousand years, survived its use. It is

one of the awful things that magic can do. It is also one of the things that you were brought here to see.

Now, I hope that I don't have to do anything further to convince you that that none here may ever, under any circumstances, speak of the existence of the magical world to anyone who is not themselves magical. What you have just seen would so frighten the Muggle population, that is to say, all those who aren't magical, that it would lead to a catastrophic, world-wide genocide against all those who are magical. Since you outnumber us by close to a thousand to one, you can understand why we are paranoid on this point.

There is a body called the International Confederation of Wizards – the ICW – which has the primary responsibility for keeping the existence of magic a secret worldwide. Unfortunately, here in the Kingdom, there is currently a madman by the name of Tom Riddle, who has taken over the magical world. He is located, we believe, in a magically protected castle located on the western coast of Scotland. He has more than two thousand supporters with him and he must be destroyed before the International Statute of Secrecy is violated and everything that wizards and witches have worked to preserve over the last three thousand years is destroyed."

"What chance do we have to stop him?" the new Defense Secretary said tremulously.

The former Auror faced the question without hesitation. "A witch or wizard can be stopped by a bullet just like anyone else, which is one reason that there is a flat, unbreakable ban on firearms, violation of which is punishable by death, in the wizarding world. Every witch and wizard is raised knowing of that ban and will not, even under pain of death, touch a firearm of any kind. That is how ingrained the ban is within magical society. Riddle's followers abide by the same ban, because every one of them, including the dark lord himself, was raised with it. That gives our side an advantage, because while Riddle and his followers are many things, they are not smart enough or aware enough of the Muggle world to know how vulnerable they truly are to Muggle weapons. And, for the most part, most all of the dark lords' followers are considerably weaker magically than the dark lord himself. However, that doesn't mean that they are not dangerous, because as you can see, the killing curse is very, very effective. However, they always kill at short range – no more than twenty to thirty feet away. I know from my time in the Muggle world –

thanks to the Prime Ministers' excellent library - that you have weapons that can kill from the other side of the country or other side of the world, if you wish them to."

It had been a terrible revelation for Kingsley, when started learning about all the ways that Muggles had to kill their fellow man, and it had scared him quite thoroughly. He realized that though magic was both great and powerful, it had its limitations. Now he was exposing those limitations to the very Muggles who might have to put the information to use and he wondered whether he was doing the right thing or not. He knew that Riddle had to die...but he wondered whether the cost of bringing that about was even more terrible than living with the evil that Riddle represented.

He put the thought aside for the moment though. He was doing what Dumbledore had asked him to do and as the saying went, in for a pence...in for a pound.

The Deputy Prime Minister, who was seated to John Major's immediate right, put up his hand hesitantly, as if he were in primary school again. Shacklebolt smiled and said, "Yes, Deputy Prime Minister?"

"Michael, please, Kingsley. If all that you've said is true, and I have no reason to believe otherwise, can you tell us all what it is that you want our government to do to help the situation? I've read all the reports and know what magic can and cannot do for the most part, but I'm still at a loss to know what you expect us to actually do."

It was the question that Kingsley had expected and the one question for which he really didn't have an answer. "Michael, first let me say that Tom Riddle is a paranoid, psychotic, homicidal megalomaniac and needs to be stopped. Secondly, I need to tell you...to tell everyone here...that currently there are only about twenty-five to thirty thousand magical people in the entire United Kingdom. That is down from about one hundred and twenty thousand, give or take a few, at the beginning of June. The balance has fled the country and is living on the Continent or has gone elsewhere. We believe, though we can't prove it, that a very large number have gone to North America.

By deduction as well as observation, we surmise that only those who can trace their lineage back through all-magical families are left

in-country. This situation is untenable for the dark lord, as those who are left do not under any circumstances want to have contact with the wider Muggle world. However, we are sure that he is now discovering that without the 'half-bloods' and "Muggle-born" in magical society, the society can't function.

The non pure-bloods have always served as the interface between Muggle and magical and without them, food isn't brought in; clothes aren't made, furniture isn't produced, etcetera, etcetera. Now, to answer your question, Riddle's forces are going to grow increasingly desperate shortly and they will begin turning on each other as well as on the Muggles who surround them. Those who have stayed behind to fight Riddle can and will tell you where the pure-bloods most likely live and I believe that it will be in your interest to find, question, and in some cases eliminate those who serve Riddle directly or indirectly.

Once his powerbase is eroded – which is something that our resistance movement can't currently do – we will have a much better shot at taking down Riddle himself."

Another hand went up – this time from the commanding officer of the SAS, 22nd Regiment. Kingsley looked at him and said, "Yes, sir. Your question?"

"What good are my forces going to be against people who can appear at a whim; kill, and then disappear again? Do you honestly expect us to be able to fight that?"

"Yes, I do. While it is true that wizards and witches can come and go as we please, the ability to do so has its limitations. One is that most magical people, unless they've had seriously advanced training can't, or at least won't, apparate at night as it often makes landing problematic. Wizards and witches the world over want to be able to see where they are going, just like Muggles. Two, most can't fight at night; a problem also overcome only by advanced magical training. I know for a fact that you and your men have no such limitations because of the gear that you carry. That's the first thing. The second thing is that you can kill at a distance and then disappear into the night with no one the wiser.

With some additional magical help however, we can turn your forces from being 'deadly' to 'irresistible'. There are things that we can do –

small stuff – that can create havoc. Have you ever wanted a way to use your chemical weapons that would absolutely kill your enemies and yet pose no threat to yourselves? Or wanted a way to be able to pop in close to your enemy; knife the son-of-a-bitch absolutely silently, and then disappear without a sound? We can do those things and I'm telling you that for the vast majority of those that you'd be facing, it will be more than enough. The rest –well, that's above my pay-grade as the Yanks say." There was a fair bit of uncomfortable squirming around the table as the Auror bluntly described the kinds of things that their military comrade had been thinking. Most hadn't stopped to think about the ways that military engagements actually were won.

The officer looked well-placated and with a nod and a 'thank you', went back to reading the report that had sat beside his plate during the entire meal.

Major turned to look up at Shacklebolt and said, "Thank you, Kingsley. I think that covers it. Was there anything else you wanted to say?"

"No, Mr. Prime Minister. I've said all that I had to say. If you need me, you know where to find me."

"I do. Thank you again."

With that, Kingsley disappeared away, leaving the assembled politicians and military officers to marvel once again at what magic could do.

Turning back to face his cabinet, the Prime Minister thought about all that Kingsley had said and realized that how he handled the hours that were to come would forever define the course of British society. He wondered if Churchill had felt something similar when he was told that the Enigma code had finally been broken or if Truman had thought the same way when he learned about the successful test at Alamogordo and realized that the end of the war could be dramatically hastened.

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Late afternoon, Hogs Head Inn, just outside Hogsmeade, Scotland,
August 21, 1995

Aberforth Dumbledore watched every Death Eater and every local who entered his bar, especially since his 'dear brother' had fled and left the ancient castle to the tender mercies of the Dark Lord. He knew their faces, their voices, and their personal mannerisms by heart. He could tell who was sleeping with whom pretty much, just by the way that certain couples interacted. He also knew when someone didn't belong or was disguised. It was like a sixth sense and it had been honed over years and years of practice and active observation.

Mondays were usually quiet and had he been running a Muggle business, he'd be enjoying a day off or using the time to catch up on the other things that had to be done in order to manage an on-going business. This particular day though, he was behind the bar, trying to figure out how he was going to manage to sneak in his next shipment of supplies while keeping an eye on the few patrons who had managed to drift in.

He was just bending over to pick up a box of glassware that he had brought up from his long-term stores when two hooded men walked in. Moving almost in synch, the two men made their way towards one of the shadowy corners of the bar, nearest the fireplace. It was obvious that they didn't want to be overheard or even observed and were making every effort to dissuade Aberforth, through their body-language, from being too curious about their presence. What they weren't aware of were the multiple, overlapping, persistent monitoring charms that surrounded every part of the bar. Some were obvious; designed to attract nosey customers' attention while others were so subtle and thorough that no one, save the most senior Unspeakables, would be able to stop.

Moving to a point behind the bar that gave him the most opportunity to watch his new customers and he wondered when they might realize that their efforts were not as effective as they'd hoped.

"We're being watched"

"I know. He's almost as canny as Albus. Can you feel the charms all around us?"

The man closed his eyes and let his magic touch the multiple charms that were layered on every surface, all around them. He was

more than a little impressed by what he discovered. "Oh...he's good. He's very, very good" the man said, almost reverently.

"But can he be trusted? Do we really know much about him?" the shorter man said, in almost a whisper.

"The question is how exactly is he surviving with snake-face just up the road? Has he cut a deal with them or not?"

"Did you notice that Albus wasn't carrying a wand that any of us have ever seen before? A part of me thinks that Aberforth might have had something to do with that and I'm not sure what to make of it. You saw Harry duel Albus. Did Harry take Albus' wand?"

"I was unconscious, remember? I was hit with a stunner from Remus Lupin or from Sirius Black. When I woke up, they were all gone. I have no idea if Harry took Albus' wand – though I'd have to admit that it's not a bad guess. If that was the wand that Albus won from Grindelwald, then Harry is the wands' new master and Albus has lost an unspeakably powerful asset."

"And you'd be right" another voice said, from just a few feet away.

Instantly, both men had wands out and just as quickly, both wands were snatched out of their hands by an unspoken disarming charm. The wands flew through the air and suddenly disappeared.

Being disarmed was bad enough, but to have your wand disappear entirely was something else altogether. As both men started to rise, each felt an invisible hand on his shoulder, pressing him back down into place.

"Easy does it you two. I'm not going to hurt either of you, but I'm also not in a mood to let you hurt me, either. It's time we had an extended talk and cleared the air."

Looking up, Arthur Weasley, former Unspeakable and current agent for Albus Dumbledore thought that he recognized the voice but said nothing for the moment. His companion said nothing either and just as quickly as the two had arrived, they were taken elsewhere, via the unmistakable magic of a portkey.

Less than ten seconds later, the three landed on the floor of what looked like a very well lit, dry, fairly large storage area – that was surrounded by floor-to-ceiling stalactites. It was immediately obvious that they were in a cave, but where that cave was and how far underground they were, it was impossible to tell. There was a slight, cooling breeze so Arthur surmised that they couldn't be too far underground and that they had to be near a wind-catching entrance of some kind.

The portkey, if that was what it was, had the curious effect of cancelling out their attackers' invisibility and as a result, Arthur saw that his guess had been right and that they had, in fact, been disarmed by Aberforth Dumbledore.

"So it is you, Aberforth"

The man smiled. His beard wasn't anywhere near as long as his brothers' famous beard, giving him a look that was more like a very, very thin St. Nicholas. "Yes, it is Arthur. And before you ask, your skills have grown rusty. I'd never have been able to disarm you so easily when you were young."

Arthur looked serious for a moment and then a sadness came over him, as if he were remembering something painful. "That was a long time ago, Aberforth. I'm a different person now."

"We all are, Arthur. We all are" the older man said softly, not wanting to dredge up more of the mans' past than was absolutely necessary. He knew that everyone was entitled the privacy of his or her past and that to say more might just be a cruelty that could destroy any trust that he might otherwise gain from the impromptu meeting.

"So why have you brought us here, Aberforth?" the shorter man said; taking down his cowl for the first time and revealing his face.

The younger Dumbledore didn't recognize the man, but he knew that if Arthur knew him and trusted his presence, then his was probably trustworthy. However, it didn't hurt to double-check. Taking out his wand, Aberforth cast his two stand-by, 'I'm-not-sure-I-trust-you-yet' charms. The first one revealed the use of Polyjuice potion and the second, the use of glamour charms and the like. The first charm came up empty, but the second registered positive. The blue,

tell-tale glow made Aberforth bring his wand up and point it at the mans' heart. "Who are you?" he said gruffly.

Bowing his head to the inevitable, the man pulled off the ring that had successfully disguised him for so long. The short, balding, non-descript man was gone and in his place stood a man who was at least 6'3" and probably closer to 6'5". He wore a striking red beard and had curly red locks of hair which were only starting to grey around the temples. Powerfully build, without an ounce of fat anywhere on his body, the man had massive arms and shoulders, along with rippling chest-muscles, and looked like he could probably pluck a medium-sized tree out of the ground and use it as a bat, were he to choose to do so.

Arthur looked at him and then gasped. "I....I know you! You're Robert the fierce! You're Minerva McGonagall's younger brother! But...I heard you were killed defending the Minister for Magic, just before the Potters were killed!"

"Aye, that's me. Damn Ministry and its twice-damned policies. Not two people there were worth a tinker's arse when I left. Thaddeus Rueben was such a coward as Minister that I actually decided to let the goons take him, rather than waste my own life defending him. However, I couldn't rightly stay after that, so I left the Ministry and went to New Zealand. They'd never heard of me before and I was able to make a pretty good living making Mead and fruit wines and raising sheep. However, when I got wind of the troubles back here, I decided that it was to 'live' again and see if I could help or at least protect Minnie. I ended up as a part of Albus' group by accident when the Ministry was being evacuated. I stuck by Arthur here and one thing just soft of led to another."

Aberforth was shocked – not so much by Robert's sudden appearance, but by the fact that he didn't know about his own sister. Before he could shut himself up, his mouth was already spilling out more than he should have said, but he seemed momentarily powerless to prevent it. "Didn't anyone tell you? She's fled! Gone to the States, we think. Dumbledore's after her because she took the school's Book of Names. "

The man's anger, as well as his magic, was unparalleled. "WHAT! I'LL KILL THE GOAT FUCKER, EVEN IF HE IS YOUR BROTHER" Robert roared.

Aberforth quickly put a hand out in a sign of peace. "Easy there, Robert. All in good time. There are lots of things to consider and there's no point in rushing in immediately. Albus will get his soon enough. He's already lost his 'precious weapon' as well that special wand of his – Harry Potter saw to that. I destroyed the other one that he favored two weeks ago, so he's down to his back-up wand, which I know for a fact doesn't serve him half as well as the other two. That makes my 'dear' brother just as vulnerable as any other trained Unspeakable. Besides which, when Harry finally does return, he's going to have a number of reasons to want to kill the Headmaster, not the least of which is what was done to him when he was growing up."

Arthur looked at the bearded man and began to wonder if anything he had ever been told by Albus was the unvarnished truth. He'd been told many things by the Headmaster about Harry, but given what he had just heard, his doubts were running deep about the old man's veracity. The twins' story about the iron bars across Harry's bedroom windows came to mind, as did Harry's emaciated look at the end of every summer.

"Did Albus ever tell you about the Prophecy?" Aberforth asked casually.

Arthur's head snapped upwards and he looked startled. "You know the prophecy?"

Aberforth put his head back and roared with laughter. It was a cross between a cackle of glee and genuine, mirthful laughter. "Yes, of course I know the full prophecy! I mean, really, after you felt all those charms today, do you think I miss anything that goes on in my bar?"

Arthur shook his head at that, amazed at his own, glaring oversight. "No, I suppose not."

"What are you two on about? What prophecy?"

Aberforth sighed. "Robert, about fifteen years ago, a young woman named Sybil Trelawney wandered into the Hogs' Head and met with Albus regarding the open position of Divination teacher. I knew that Albus wasn't keen on meeting with her, because as you know, most

all of Divination is just pure crap. You either have the gift or you don't. Anyway, Sybil's grandmother was a very famous and genuine Seer and so Albus thought it was the politic thing to do to meet with her. However that night, during their meeting, Sybil made an actual prophecy about Harry Potter and the dark lord. Here it is:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

So there it is. Severus Snape heard the first two lines of it before I threw his arse out. He took the information and went running right to the Riddle with it. That's why Riddle's been after Harry ever since. Only Harry has the power to kill Riddle. Whether Riddle knows the second part or not, I can't be sure, but I know, as does Albus, that only Harry can kill him. That's why Albus has been so desperate to control Harry. I think it's because he wants to sacrifice Harry to his 'greater good'. Now, I'm pretty sure that Harry's heard at least part of it, but not all of it. I've wanted to send it to him, so he'd know what he's really in for, but all the owls I've tried to send have turned back."

"Have you tried sending your Patronus?"

Looking defeated and deflated, Aberforth sagged. "I can't do a corporeal Patronus. I know the incantation, but have never been able to focus properly." He sounded like a little boy for a moment, saddened that he couldn't do something that his father could do and it surprised both Arthur and Robert.

Arthur looked at the two men and said with some pride, "I can. Harry taught me, my boys, and my youngest, Ginny - who's only just turned 14 - how to do it."

Aberforth's mouth dropped open, as did Robert's. Robert said, "You're kidding, right? How can a fifteen year-old produce a truly corporeal Patronus?"

"I don't know, but Ginny and my twins all told me that Harry not only produces a corporeal Patronus, but used one to chase off more than one hundred Dementors at the end of his third year. Remus Lupin

taught him how to do it. Harry saved Sirius Black's life, twice that night apparently, and protected Hermione Granger from being attacked as well."

The two men were beyond astonished. Being able to turn back that many Dementors spoke of a wizard more powerful than any they had ever heard about, much less met.

"Can you teach me?" Aberforth asked, trying to hide his excitement.

"Me, too" Robert said.

"I'll teach you both. It takes some work, but if I can do it, both of you can."

The two men beamed. Being able to produce a corporeal Patronus was a point of pride with wizards. It was sort of an unspoken societal measuring stick. Adult wizards bragged about the strength of theirs, in much the same way that Muggles bragged about other, similar things. It also didn't hurt that both were motivated by the thought that Arthur's youngest could do before they could and that they weren't willing to put up with that a moment longer than was absolutely necessary.

An hour later, Arthur was satisfied that with some practice, both men would be able to produce a satisfactory, largely corporeal Patronus. He warned them that the best way to practice actually doing so was to do what Harry had done with Remus Lupin and find a Boggart that they could charm to appear as a Dementor.

Before Aberforth returned them all to the Hogs' Head, he asked Arthur to send his Patronus to Minerva, along with the memory of the entire prophecy. Robert insisted that he wanted to send his own Patronus to his sister, to let her know that he was still alive, and that practicing to do so would be good for him. He also donned his ring of disguise once more, so that when they appeared again in the Inn, that his real identity wouldn't be compromised. He wasn't ready for that.

Once the three re-appeared in the Inn, things were quiet and dark. Apparently, the Inn had a charm in place, so that any time Aberforth left the premises, it would lock itself up tight. "We need to go, Arthur.

We are expected back in London by tonight and we're cutting it close as it is."

"You two take care of yourselves. The three of us could do great things if we stick together. Arthur, try to recruit others to our cause, if you can. I know that there are others who are disaffected with Albus. See if you can get them over to our side. We've got to make sure that Albus doesn't realize his dream of sacrificing Harry and we've got to make sure that when Riddle is destroyed that Albus doesn't take his place."

Arthur nodded. It was the same fear that had been growing inside him and he was glad that they and Aberforth had crossed paths, so that the fear could be articulated and dealt with the right way.

"Ready?"

Robert nodded. "Let's go."

With that, the two disappeared; leaving Aberforth to return to his duties behind the bar and to his private thoughts about brothers, families, and the war that they were all facing.

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter nine – "Revelations"

By the_scribbler

the_scribbler (at) shadowgard (d*t) com

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Disclaimer: I do not own any of the Harry Potter characters. All characters are creations of Joanne K. Rowling, © 2007, to whom I am deeply indebted.

CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER (eventually) SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

Note Two: Most all of the geography described in this particular chapter actually exists. I do a great deal of my research on GOOGLE-EARTH and rely on the pictures and cartography found there to more adequately describe things for this story. If you have a question about a place or thing that I have mentioned, please email me.

Note Three: The Headmistress of the Quebec School of Magic is named "Madame Thérèse Renaude Lapointe" and not Madame Thésèse Renaude Lapointe, as I had it spelled previously. The "R" in her first name makes a difference!

Early in the morning of August 22, 1995 – in the village of St. Monique, Quebec - just off Rue St. Adolphe

Minerva McGonagall was in her element in the village of St. Monique. It was a farming village and didn't boast much in the way of amenities, but it did have one very good and very accommodating café, in which was served some of the best croissants and coffee that she had ever had. More, she had discovered, from her wanderings as a cat, that the locals were both very friendly and very amenable. More people had put out food for her as a cat than had ever happened in London or its environs.

She had come to the village on Harry's behalf, in search of a large area of land that could be purchased for the twin purposes of providing a magical training area and a Quidditch pitch plus stadium, similar to the set-up at Hogwarts. It was also her hope that she might be able to find a place to call her own. It was the one thing she hadn't had since her husband was killed and she longed to have a garden and a place to which she could retreat when things got to be too much to bear. With the war coming, she knew that there might be many such days in her future and she wanted to strike while the iron was hot.

During her wanderings, she had found that there was a powerful feeling of magical energy in the area. She couldn't figure out why that might be, and it became something of a priority with her to discover its source. However, it was early in the morning and while the café was open, there were few patrons to interrupt her thoughts. She had just taken a bite of her chocolate croissant when she felt the telltale tingle of powerful magic being used nearby. Looking around, she realized that she was, for the moment, alone in the café, save for the owners themselves, and they were out back, in the café's small kitchen. Taking a chance that her disappearance would not be noticed, she stood, took her coffee and croissant in hand, and disappeared, save for a faint 'pop'.

She reappeared in the unused alley between the café and the village's little library, her wand out in an instant. Turning around, she used her own magical core to seek out the powerful feeling again, like the magnet in a compass trying to seek true north. For several long moments, she thought that maybe she had lost track of it or that the magic had somehow been dispelled during the precious seconds it had taken her to apparate, but then she got lucky: the

feeling began again in the pit of her stomach and she looked across the river, where a silvery light was moving fast in her direction. It was someone's Patronus; moving up the river and right at her. The only thing was....she didn't recognize it, which was saying something, because she thought she knew the Patronus form of every single person who she knew was capable of one.

As the Patronus drew closer, she could see that it had a long, sleek form. At first, she thought it was Hermione's original Patronus – which had been an Otter – but then she realized that with Hermione's bonding to Harry, there was every reason to believe that her form had shifted to something new. Finally, the Patronus was at her feet and she realized that it was a European Mink, which was type of weasel. Reaching out, she touched it; allowing all the good feelings and magic that come with Patroni to flow into her.

As she magically embraced the Patronus, she let the message which the Patronus had carried enter her thoughts. What surprised her most was the voice that bore the message:

"Dearest Minnie" the voice said, "if you are taking in this message, then I have succeeded in doing the thing that may change this war. I pray that you are safe and that Harry and Hermione are as well. It is for their sake that I am sending this message. I want you to know that there are many things that I regret, but none so much as what happened between my two youngest and Harry. I fear that I let them and my wife get away with doing things that were despicable for far too long. That has changed, now that I know the truth. I am sending you this message because Harry has to know the truth... He has to know the full prophecy. I cannot reach you now, given what has happened, but I will do everything I can to make sure that the two tyrants, who seek to control our beloved country, don't succeed. Here is the prophecy, in full:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

- JRK; HP & OoTP

"Minnie", the voice of the Weasley Patriarch continued, "I have made new friends here and have found an old friend as well, whom I thought had been killed years ago.

However, things are bad here and getting worse: There have been 57 unexplained deaths of Muggles in southwestern Scotland in the last three days. The best that we can tell, Riddle has either made a pact with the Dementors or is, perhaps, planning on using Muggles' souls for some kind of foul ritual. The problem is that there aren't enough of us to really investigate properly. The other thing that has gone horribly wrong is that it has become obvious that Albus doesn't know what to do and has become at best an ineffectual leader. Most of the loyal survivors from the Ministry follow him blindly, because they have no idea what Albus has done to try to manipulate all of us, but there are those of us who have become seriously disaffected. Aberforth is trying to organize a fifth column and I've decided to support him....and support Harry. There was a time when I thought that Albus could do no wrong, but now I know better. Riddle is still afraid of him, but that will end, sooner or later, and when it does, I fear for all of us.

We can't risk our contact being compromised, so don't respond to this. Have Hermione arrange for a wanted-ad – maybe for a slightly used Phoenix? - To be placed in this coming Friday's circular for the London Daily Mail. One of our number here is muggle-born and will suss it out for us. That will tell us that you got my message.

There are so many things I want to say to you, but many of them will have to wait for a better day. The one thing that I must say – the thing that I can't say strongly enough - is that you **MUST** protect Harry and Hermione **AT ANY COST!**. All our lives depend on it **AND FOR GOD'S SAKE, DON'T LET HIM COME BACK HERE UNTIL HE IS REALLY READY!**

Just as soon as it had started, the message ended and Minerva McGonagall was left to ponder about a number of things, not the least of which was the sudden and rather dramatic switching of sides by her former pupil. Last she knew, he was working directly for Dumbledore and had been present but silent when Ron Weasley had attacked Harry Potter in the Headmaster's office.

While she hadn't given it a great deal of thought, she wondered why Arthur had chosen to align himself with Dumbledore, even after it

had become obvious that the old man had done something rather dramatic and foolish to alienate Harry Potter. She had always known Arthur Weasley to be an extremely reasonable, thoughtful, and generous man – even if he had always been given towards being much more forgiving than was prudent with his children. For a moment, she let her mind wander and remembered back to when Arthur was a student. He had been amazing; a master at both charms and transfiguration, and had gone on to work for the Ministry (probably, though she didn't know for certain) as an Unspeakable. She had always thought that he would rise quickly within the Ministry – until the Ministry itself was eliminated and their world fell apart.

The air was still cool, even though it was only the end of August, and as the last of the morning fog burned off and the sun was fully revealed, Minerva decided that she was going to have to get the information about the Prophecy to Harry, Hermione, Sirius, et al. as quickly as possible, so that they could decide what to do with it.

Before disappearing, she sipped her coffee (which she had zapped to re-heat) and then nibbled on the tail-end of her croissant. There was no point in racing off, as it was entirely likely that Harry and Hermione were still asleep and would not appreciate such an early-morning visit.

The last bit of the delectable pastry was just past her lips when something occurred to the powerful witch: she still hadn't contacted Amelia to tell her where she was. Shaking her head at her oversight, she automatically called up her very best, most thrilling and most loving memory before she cast. 'Expecto Patronum!'

The massive, silvery Scottish wildcat which she had always favored leapt from her wand and then rubbed up against her legs, before she touched her forehead with the tip of her wand to extract the thoughts that she wanted to send to her dearest, life-long friend. Once the silvery strands of thought were wound around her wand-tip, she carefully placed them on the forehead of her Patronus. The creature seemed to glow extra-bright for a moment before turning and disappearing to the east.

Satisfied that she had rectified her mistake, she checked herself for crumbs; finished the last swallows of coffee, and then quietly disappeared, without so much as a pop!

In the early hours before dawn, Friday, August 25, 1995 – ½ mile above Lake Orestiada, on the far-eastern side of Kastoria Peninsula, Western Macedonia

Lucius Malfoy stopped and smiled in the darkness. At just after 0330 hours, he was usually asleep...but not this particular morning. All around him were his men...ones he had hand-picked for this important mission. They were the best that dark magic had to offer and he knew that if any team could pull off the operation, it was this one.

The three thousand year-old caves, dug at a time when the people of the Hellenic world were still playing with bronze and fighting wars across the seas by boat, lined the northern flank of the Kastoria Peninsula. They were closely guarded secrets; each cave protected by a modified Fidelius charm that worked only for Goblins.

Lucius knew about the area because he had carefully suborned information from some of the Macedonian and Greek traders who had done business occasionally with the Goblins. While they had not been able to give him precise information regarding the location of the main caves, they had none-the-less pointed him in the right direction. Veritaserum hadn't even been needed! They had given up the information willingly – because the local Goblin leaders had ignored their entreaties for a more formal arrangement.

By a process of elimination worthy of any good Muggle scientist, the elder Malfoy had been able to make a series of logical deductions that led him to a much more exact location. After that, all it had taken was several days of silently watching the comings and goings of Goblins in the area. So used to being unnoticed, the Goblins had grown somewhat lax in their own security. Step by step, his men had tightened the observational noose until, beyond a certain point; the Goblins' wards had taken over and repelled them. However, what he and his team had learned up until that point had been quite enough to make him certain of having found the Goblins' home.

Some caves, especially those used as living spaces, were heavily (physically) guarded and magically warded and each cave employed a slightly different mix of the two. The only thing that was consistent from cave to cave was that they were dug down, into miles of the underlying Carboniferous Pieria Granitoid Complex (CPGC) rock, which because of its high density and almost diamond-hard carbon

content, shielded the caves completely from the types of magic employed by human wizards. It was for that reason that Lucius Malfoy had jumped at the chance to employ a very special team of ward-breakers – disaffected (male) Veela who, because of the restrictions that the ICW placed on them and the Goblins rigorously enforced, had every reason to hate the Goblins.

As the three teams, twenty-strong each, made their way up the mountain, the twenty- to thirty-foot high Macedonian pines cast the entire mouth of the cave into almost total darkness – save for the occasional flicker of moonlight that made its way between the trees. For the Veela, this wasn't an issue, because they could see very, very well in the dark. For the death-eaters though, it was a problem and many of them found themselves stumbling over rocks and roots. For some, the result was a simple, twisted ankle or scrapped shin-bone but for others it was more severe. Lucius swore as two of the wizards from team two fell. One had a broken ankle and could no longer walk, while the other had a broken knee – the result of falling forward in the dark and landing on a rocky out-cropping.

Lucius paused the assault at 0415 hours, which just long enough to send the two men back to their headquarters via portkey. He was disgusted that wizards under his command could be so sloppy and he cursed himself for not taking greater care to see to it that his men knew the terrain. The cold, hard fact was that if the mission failed because they were two wands short of having enough manpower, his life was probably forfeit. It was frustrating too, because he knew very well that the Muggle government's military had technology that could see perfectly in the total dark...but magical people could not use it because the electronics that made it possible did not survive in the presence magic or magical creatures.

He didn't dwell on the matter though because he had to focus on the here-and-now. The two eastern European wizards, parselmouths both, who were commanding (and containing) the basilisk in its special, protective cage, had to be protected at all costs, lest they lose the ability to release the terrible creature at the most opportune moment. It was his teams' responsibility to get the two men close enough to the entrance of the cave that their release of the basilisk would be successful and all of them could get away from it without being killed by its uncontrolled gaze. His master's orders had been very clear on the matter – break the Goblins and make them comply with his wishes and he intended to do just that.

The third team was in charge of killing whatever sentries there might be and making sure that no one came up behind them, in a pincer movement. More, they were to see to it that no one could apparate in or out and there was sufficient portkey suppression. Anti-apparition and anti-portkey wards worked against pretty much all wizards, save for the very most powerful, including Dumbledore. It was unknown whether Potter could break through such barriers, but Lucius Malfoy didn't put it past him. He had seen Potter duel his master and live to tell the tale – something that no other wizard, except for Albus Dumbledore and James Potter, had ever achieved. It was not something to take lightly.

Shaking his head to clear the distraction away, in the same manner as he would rid himself of a cobweb, Malfoy watched as the remaining team members moved in orderly fashion to surround the mouth of the cave. They were in a line that was roughly twenty-five meters across, at just over an arms' length apart from each other.

With a series of hand-signs, he ordered the holding/warding team to fall back by thirty paces, so that they couldn't be seen and so that no one who was hostile could get a close-in shot at their backs without being seen in turn by his men. The other two teams, his included, moved in closer. After a moment's coordination, the thirty Veela wizards began incanting; creating a luminous blue field. Their principal job was to take down the rest of the cave's defenses, while providing coverage for the two with the basilisk.

Almost immediately, Lucius knew that something was wrong. He didn't see the Veela wizard farthest away from him fall, but the blue field flickered for a moment before regaining its full strength. Fearing that they hadn't accounted for everything, Lucius signaled to one of his trusted lieutenants who, in turn, drew his wand and made his way into the darkness. A moment later, there were shouts and flashes of angry spells being exchanged and Lucius heard the screams of men being cut down. A wand in both hands, he threw caution to the wind and made his way as quickly as he could towards where the spell-fire was most violent. Just as he made it to the skirmishing line, a blazing, terribly hot spell missed him by inches; smashing into the short pine to his left. It made him duck and return fire blindly. A hand suddenly pushed him right.

"Get your fucking head down, Lucius!" one of his lieutenants hissed; risking the insubordination.

Too concerned about what was happening to be angry at the disrespectful words, Malfoy said, "How many?"

"No idea. Lukovitch suddenly screamed and I turned to find out what was happening when someone snapped a curse at me."

A moment later, another curse snapped over his head and plowed into a tree somewhere off to his left.

Taking a risk, Lucius pointed his wand straight up and said "Lumos Solara!"

Immediately, a massive flare, bright as the sun, leapt into the sky, to a height of 100 ft. It lit the entire area; showing the elder Malfoy what, exactly, he and his men were confronting. It was either going to get them all killed or allow them to see what they were facing and deal with it effectively.

Thankfully, it did exactly what he had hoped: the burst of light illuminated a dozen or so half-human/half-goblin guards and four wizards, dressed in gray fatigues. His men, trained for hour after hour on spell-accuracy and rapid delivery, dropped all of the defenders immediately. Lucius then canceled his spell and total darkness immediately returned to the area. It was a dramatic, if rather comforting difference, and each of the remaining wizards breathed a momentary sigh of relief.

Remembering his training and his goal, he ordered each of the team leaders to report. When they did so, he discovered, to his pleasure, that only one of his men had been really hurt and that field first-aid had saved the man's arm and made him fit to continue the assault. The news, however, didn't take any of the urgency out of the moment.

Speaking quickly, he urged the Veela to finish the job and bring down the rest of the wards that defended the caves, so that the Basilisk could be sent among the Goblins.

Without the spell-fire to distract them, the Veela rushed to resume their efforts and soon the blue, coronal field was once again at full-

strength and working to take down the magical barriers which were the last line of defense for the caves.

Lucius watched as the Veela poured themselves into the effort of destroying the Goblin defenses and had to smile inwardly at the sheer, dumb luck which had led him to recruiting the tall, perfectly blonde, almost unnaturally handsome wizards. He thought for a moment about his beautiful Narcissa and the gorgeous blonde Veela, Dani, whom they had brought to their bed as a playmate. She had been such an extraordinary lover for the two of them – aggressive, playful, and completely perfect for their intimate play. She had also been an amazing, unexpected goldmine of information about the Goblins and had led him to talk to her brother, Stephan.

It was Stephan who, more than anyone else, had made the assault possible. He had organized the other, full-blooded Veela wizards and delivered them as a packaged solution right to Lucius' front door.

The other Death Eaters around Lucius watched as the golden field – the semi-physical manifestation of the ward around the inner mouth of the cave - began to flicker wildly. Once it was gone, the two parselmouths would have to position the crate containing the Basilisk as close to the inner entrance as possible; release the horrible creature, and then return him to his full size once it was out.

With one hand, Stephan signaled to Lucius that the ward was almost down and that the two parselmouths needed to be ready.

It was the thing that they had trained for most intensely and every single one of his men stood to the ready; guarding each other's backs and making sure that the two wizards could work their magic quickly and without interference.

Gesticulating wildly with his free hand, Stephen signaled silently, "5 – 4 – 3 – 2 – 1...NOW"

Once the defensive field collapsed, the two wizards did exactly as they had been trained to do. They raced forward with the crate between them; placed it on the ground with the magical gate facing the cave, released the gate and lifted the back of the crate off the ground – speaking in Parseltongue as they did so. §Go forth and kill all the dark-skinned ones ahead of you. Eat until you are content. Destroy all who oppose you! §

More slowly than any of them liked, the great Basilisk slithered out of its cage and tasted the air with its great, forked tongue. The two wizards backed away from the animal; enlarging it to its true size, before beating a retreat into the darkness. As a precaution, Lucius had given the two men special portkeys that were available for use only once the magical door of the crate had been lifted away. The moment that the two knew their job was done, they portkeyed away; finally safe from the baleful, lethal gaze of the most terrible of snakes.

Ordering his men to fall back into the darkness, Lucius watched the tail of the almost seventy-foot Basilisk disappear down into the cave. It might be hours or days before the results of the nights' assault were fully manifest, but he was sure that he had scored a major victory on behalf of his master and their cause and for once, he was well-pleased.

Three days earlier (August 22nd), mid-afternoon GMT, near No. 12, Calle Silverio Alonso; San Cristobal de la Laguna, on the northern end of the Island of Tenerife

Amelia Bones was a woman feeling happy and safe; as far (more than 1,950 miles) away from the United Kingdom as she had ever been. Having taken to wearing a long brown, traditional jilbab over her muted, mustard-yellow-ish pants and full-length top, she blended into the mostly Muslim population, with nary more than a passing glance from anybody she encountered. It was oddly comforting, especially after working and living in London where she was so well known among the wizarding population, to be able to walk totally unnoticed among the crowds that swelled in the markets in the late afternoons or along the street outside of the quiet, non-descript apartment where she had taken temporary refuge after leaving France.

Normally, the heat of the afternoon would have sent her indoors, to her cool apartment and to her dark bedroom for a mid-afternoon nap...but this particular day found her walking along the street outside. The stone wall, which was waist-high and decorated at irregular intervals by graffiti written in Arabic, Spanish, Kiswahili, and several other languages that she didn't know.

There were birds singing, though not with the same gusto as they did in the early morning outside her window. She smiled as she remembered that she had been tempted, during her first few mornings, to cast a silencing charm on them, but thought better of it. It took some getting-used-to, to be sure, but she was acclimating quickly.

Stopping for a moment to rest her feet and to smell one of the beautiful orange flowers that covered many of the bushes that lined the back side of the stone wall, beneath the ubiquitous palm trees, Amelia Bones – former Minister of Magic for the United Kingdom – realized that she was happy not being burdened by the obsequious sycophants that populated the upper levels of the Ministry bureaucracy. She had money, her wand, her health, a fairly vast private magical library (though it paled in comparison to the one that Minerva had 'borrowed' from Hogwarts), and the means to get about – including her own Nimbus 2000.

At the moment, Amelia needed two things: food and a good book. Both could be had for something approximating a song (given the exchange rate between Galleons and the local currency) within an easy walking distance of the apartment. Turning northeast, she started walking again.

She had gone maybe ten or eleven steps when she felt the tell-tale tingle of powerful magic up and down her back. Immediately she slipped her wand into her hand, crouched down, and put her back tight to the wall, so that she'd be less exposed if attacked. It was a bit awkward, but she endured it, because she wasn't planning on dying any time soon and it was better to be safe than sorry.

She looked up and down the street; trying to catch a glimpse of whatever had set off her 'magic' radar and for a moment, saw nothing. Then, as she concentrated on what her magic was telling her, she saw it: the silvery, spectral image of an enormous Scottish wildcat coming at her fast from down the street. She might have missed it because of the glare of the sun, but it became visible during the moments when it passed through the shadows cast by the 30 ft. trees that lined the northeast side of the street.

It didn't take any kind of genius to realize to whom this particular Patronus belonged. It could only be the product of one Minerva

McGonagall; transfiguration professor and Kneazle extraordinaire. The moment the Patronus was close enough, Amelia touched it with a finger-tip and absorbed the message that it bore, so that she could dissipate the spell. Even as far away as she was from the Ministry, the ICW, and all the 'normal' authorities, she still felt the normal compunction to protect the message that the Patronus bore was short, sweet, and to the point:

"Bonsey!" her friends' voice said clearly, "Things are progressing nicely here...but it would be great to have some more girlfriends around. Come to the Plains of Abraham. Send message the normal way when you get here. We'll find you! Lots of love, Minnie"

Standing, Amelia leaned against the trunk of the palm tree that shaded the section of street where she had stopped and took in what she had just been told. The Plains of Abraham, she knew from her University days, was in Quebec City, Quebec and was the site of a massive battle between the French and British on 12 September 1759. It was battle that was largely responsible for breaking France's hold on all of its territory within eastern North America over the following four years and for the creation of the country of Canada.

If Harry and Hermione were in Quebec, then her niece Susan was there too, along with her husband, Neville. She smiled at the thought of seeing her niece again and hoped that marriage hadn't wrought too many changes in her – a thought which, correctly translated, really meant that she hoped her niece wasn't already pregnant. Going to Quebec also meant rejoining the group of people, including Minnie, who knew her best and had known her the longest. It was a comforting thought on one hand, but slightly sad on the other, because it meant that she'd have to give up her wandering ways and what might be her only shot at seeing places like Tenerife that she might never otherwise have visited.

After being confined by her Ministerial responsibilities for so long, she had found to her delight that she really liked traveling and seeing new places and not having to be answerable to anyone else save her own conscience and budget.

She knew that she didn't have to answer Minnie immediately, as she had not included any of the precious code-words that they had

worked out over the years, so she turned with a grin on her face and made her way towards her original destination.

In a week or so Minnie would get her answer, the former Minister of Magic decided, but not right now. There were books to read (always) and places/events to explore – like the Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria – that celebrates the patron saint of Tenerife. She had loved the fact that the entire fiesta was centered on the re-enactment of the appearance of the Virgin Mother – which the islanders thought marked a turning point in the fortunes of the island. There was also the Fiesta de San Bartolomé de Geneto – which she planned to attend, two days hence.

As she thought about it, she realized that her not wanting to leave boiled down to the fact that she simply wasn't ready to pass those things by. Fighting Tom Riddle was important – maybe more important than anything else she had ever done in her life - but so was not forgetting to live while she had the opportunity and she had that opportunity. All she had to do was seize it. Carpe diem, as the saying went.

Late afternoon, Thursday, August 31, 1995 - Centre Hospitalier Universite Laval; section Magique

Bethany St. Bertrand watched as her only patient for the last month got up out of her wheelchair and walked the last fifty feet towards the front doors of their facility.

At first, the staff had been unsure as to whether she was truly ready for discharge, but those fears had been overcome by the woman's dogged persistence and willingness to push herself during her physical therapy sessions. She watched from the shadows as Harry Potter, in the company of another, taller, ruggedly handsome, black-haired man and an amazingly beautiful brunette met Isabelle with hugs and smiles and then walked her out of the facility.

A voice said, "She said she'd do it and so she did. You should be proud, Bethany. You made it possible." The young, beautiful nurse turned and said, with a blush in her cheeks, "Thank you, Dr. Laval"

Edmond Laval, the great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandson of the man for whom the hospital was named – Francois de Laval – smiled at her softly. "There's

something that I was asked to give you, Bethany, though I'm not entirely sure how you're going to feel about it."

Curious, she looked into his radiant blue eyes and almost lost herself in their perfection, before she steadied herself mentally and said, "What....what do you mean?"

"Come with me to my office, Bethany, and I will show you." He said, turning and holding out his arm in what was an unmistakable gesture. She took the proffered arm and the two walked past the reception desk and over to the private elevator which served the executive offices of the Hospital.

Once the doors were closed, he pressed the button for the top floor and then disengaged a little bit before saying, "There's something I need to ask you, Bethany, and it's not a question I can ask in public."

She knew that a question phrased that way usually meant that what was about to be asked was a question of a very personal nature and it set off her personal alarms. However, she thought of herself as a professional and was used to dealing with difficult questions from patients, so she bucked up her courage and said, "What is it that you want to know?"

In a move that was uncharacteristic, Edmond Laval ran his hand through his hair and then stepped back from her, so that he could gather his own fortitude. Just as he was about to do so, the elevator stopped and the doors opened. Signaling that she should go first, he pointed towards the mahogany double-doors at the end of the hallway.

"Through the doors, Bethany. Then take a seat. I don't know how long this is going to take."

She nodded and did as he asked. When they got to the doors, he flashed a magnetic pass-card at the door and there was an audible 'click'. Bethany turned the handle and opened the door; seeing the Executive office for the first time. It was every bit as nice as she had thought it would be. It was also every bit as understated as its current occupant and that too, she thought, was as it should be.

Taking a seat as instructed, she was soon joined by her boss – who had an enormous mug of tea in hand. Seeing her eyes follow the mug he said, "I gave up the late-afternoon drink years ago, when my father said that it was a dangerous habit. I've been drinking tea ever since. Just as bad a habit, but with far fewer side-effects."

She smiled at that. "My weakness too, I'm afraid."

"Good. Now, let me ask the question that I was gearing up for in the elevator."

As if prompted by some unseen force she said, "I'm single and straight, if that's what you wanted to know"

Edmond Laval snorted into his tea and tried to prevent it from spilling all over his lap.

For a moment, Bethany was horrified that she had said the wrong thing or that she had mistaken his intentions. However, when he looked up at her, there was a very strong, honest smile on his face. "You almost got me with that, Bethany. I'm going to have to be careful around you, I think." His smile disarmed her; allowing her to let go of some of the tension she'd been carrying in her shoulders.

Taking a deep breath, she let it out slowly and then asked, "Then what is it that you need to know?"

"Are you a witch?" Bethany had been ready for many, many things.....but not that. Never, ever that. Her face gave away her answer, even before she could formulate a lie. He sagged.

"That's what I thought"

Feeling like she didn't have a choice, she deftly drew her wand from the hidden holster between her shoulder-blades and pointed it at him and said in a very steady, unwavering voice "Give me one reason that I shouldn't make you forget that I was ever here."

She watched him swallow hard; set down his tea, and then raise both hands, palms-out, in a motion that said, "I surrender".

The wand flicked once and the doors made a squelching sounds. Another flick and the curtains closed by themselves. She flicked it a

third time and it suddenly became unnaturally quiet in the room. "No one can hear us, see us, or get to us now and there is absolutely nothing stopping me from wiping your memory of my existence. Now, tell me why you know about our world."

His eyes no longer were as friendly as they had been. He was scared and she knew it.

She could tell that he was thinking about what his options were and she didn't want to hurt him, so she said, "Before you even consider whether you could disarm me, know that since I heal people for a living... I know exactly how to do the opposite as well. All you have to do is tell me how you know of our world and we can end this nicely."

The soft, demure girl that she presented to the outside world was gone; replaced by the hard-edged girl who had been top of her class in Defense against the Dark Arts.

"I.....I heard the two men today talking, before they knew who I was and before they introduced themselves. They must not have known how close I was or that I could hear what they were saying. One of them, the younger one, Harry I think his name is, was very concerned about what had happened to Ms. Gattineau. He called himself something else at first....Harold Evens I think....anyway, he said to the older man that he hadn't known that a wandless compression spell could do what it did to her. The taller man, I didn't get his name, said that he was surprised that Ms. Gattineau had survived at all and that she was very lucky that the other woman – Hermione, I think – wasn't hurt worse."

Bethany nodded. A compression spell did indeed make sense to her and fit the injuries that she had seen when Isabelle Gattineau had been brought to the hospital. That Harry had done it wandlessly....spoke of power beyond her comprehension. No one, not even the great Albus Dumbledore, was said to have that kind of power (though, in point of fact, no one really knew what his limits were and no one wanted to find out).

"Bethany....who are they? Who are YOU?"

She smiled, weakly. "You know who I am....well, sort of. My name is indeed Bethany St. Bertrand, though I'm thirty years older than I look.

Witches and wizards don't age the same way non-magicals do. I will look this way for....well, you'll be long since dead before I look middle-aged. Anyway, I'm a forth-generation witch...meaning my mother, her mother, and my mother's grandmother were all witches as well. That young man you saw today? His name is Harry. Harry Potter. He's the most famous wizard currently living. He comes from a family that has been magical since at least five hundred years before Jesus was born. He's also the most powerful wizard alive – which in your terms means he's as close to being a god as you could possibly imagine."

"What do you mean? A god? That's nonsense." Laval said.

"No, it's not, Dr. Laval. Harry Potter can do anything you can possibly imagine, except raise the dead. That's magic's only limitation."

"I don't believe you."

"Fine. That will make erasing your memory easier." She lifted her wand and pointed it at his head.

"No! Wait. I have something I have to give you. It got here two days ago, with your name on it."

"Where is it?"

"In the safe."

Bethany smiled. She looked over at the wall-safe; pointed her wand at it, and incanted silently, "Alohamora!"

The safe sprang open and there was indeed a large, manila envelope with her name on it. She summoned it with another flick and it sailed across the room to her waiting hand. She opened the envelope and took out a sheet of paper. Attached to the paper was a small key, which she recognized instantly as belonging to a Gringotts vault. At the top of the paper was a short note. It said:

August 29, 1995

Dear Bethany:

There are not enough words to express our thanks for what you have done for Ms. Gatineau over the last month, so I will keep

this brief. I have attached to this letter a key and hope that you will, as soon as time allows, take yourself to Gringotts-Toronto

and there present yourself to Toothbender. He has been asked to expect you and to show you every courtesy. It is our hope

that what you find in your new vault expresses, better than this letter ever could, our appreciation for your dedication and

professionalism. Thank you for all you've done.

Regards,

Harry Potter

Hermione Potter

Lord Sirius Arcturus Black

Bethany sat stunned at what she had just read. It was a signed note from Harry Potter himself – and countersigned by both his wife and Lord Sirius Black. Bethany was sure that it had been the new Lord Black himself who had accompanied Harry to the hospital. She was surprisingly grateful, in a way that she never expected to be, for the time that she had been forced to put into studying the great magical families of Europe – of which the Blacks were one of the most prominent.

After folding the letter and placing it carefully into her magical pocket, she again took up her wand and said, "I'm sorry to have to do this, Dr. Laval, but there's too much at stake for you to be wandering around, knowing about us and our world. I'm going to call a friend of mine right now and have her come and modify your memory. When she's finished, all you'll remember of me is that I'm a dedicated, trustworthy employee who's never given you any problems and just gets her work done. You'll also remember that we once had a very nice coffee together and that you enjoyed it."

"You sure that it's necessary, Bethany? I could be a help to you in your career..." Bethany looked at him and then threw her head back and laughed.

Twenty minutes later, Bethany St. Bertrand walked out of the Executive Offices of the hospital feeling a great deal more secure. Her bosses' memory had been successfully modified and she no longer felt as though the Statute of Secrecy was in danger. Moreover, she had earned the thanks of the most powerful wizard alive – which was never a bad thing. She walked towards the elevator and then stopped. Looking around and seeing that there was no one in the hallway, she disappeared. Her last thought before disappearing was that there was a great deal to do and there was no time like the present.

Early morning, Friday, Sept. 1, 1995 – in a non-descript apartment off Slade Road; Ottery St. Mary; Devon

The static of the Wizarding Wireless broke into the comforting sounds of the first broadcast of the WW's version of BBC4's "News and Papers" show, telling Molly Weasley that it was Five am.

Always a morning person, Molly was first one up in the house and she had long since settled into a routine. It began with hot tea – always Harrods No. 14 English Breakfast tea – that Mundungus Fletcher obtained for her, using funds that she had squirreled away over the years. The scones that she always took with her tea were her own; made with fresh lemon zest, ground almonds, sugar, a pinch of salt, a half-teaspoon of cinnamon, one half-cup of buttermilk, baking soda, baking powder, and two cups of flour, along with a generous half-cup of sweet, unsalted butter. Sometimes, if she were feeling particularly decadent, she smeared a generous teaspoon of Caffè Florian's Chocolate & Hazelnutspread on a warm piece, which was her other private Harrods treasure.

As she hummed to herself and went about her routine, which included cleaning up after her husband, Molly Weasley thought about how much things had changed. The first was that only two of her children were at home – the rest having abandoned the family. The second change was that Arthur was no longer working at the Ministry, which meant that he was around and 'under foot' more often – to her considerable consternation. They had been forced to

abandon the Burrow, because of the constant threats against their lives by Riddle's forces.

To make matters worse, not only had she been shamed and silenced by her husband repeatedly either before or after the Resistance movement meetings, but things had turned positively toxic at home. She had been openly and sometimes caustically disrespected by her only daughter, who seemed to be taking her father's side in the increasingly frequent (and bitter) family arguments.

Topping it off, it had become obvious that Ron was pretty much a miserable failure as a wizard; even though Molly had done everything she could in order to get him to practice his magic and improve himself academically. He was a true embarrassment. Because he was unable discipline his mind and focus, he couldn't even conjure even the smallest objects permanently. On top of that, his charm work was pathetic and his potions skills were ghastly. To his father's shame, Ron had no feel at all for transfiguration and would never be able to even consider becoming an animagus. It was as if he just didn't care about being able to use the skills that his lineage had given him.

Ron's one, redeeming skill was Quidditch...and Molly knew that meant that he'd be jobless for pretty much his entire life, if things didn't get back to normal in wizarding England. Her need for control over all things precluded even considering sending him abroad to play. His only hope lay in marrying a smart witch who would support him.

Molly ground her teeth and stopped her chores for a moment as she thought about all the things that had 'gone wrong' in her life. She cursed, not for the first time, the girl at whose feet she laid many of her complaints: Hermione Granger.

To Molly's way of thinking, Hermione had left her youngest son and had gone off with Harry Potter – betraying them all and leaving her and her family to suffer, broke and disgraced, under the new regime. In truth, Molly was experiencing her own private version of hell.

Peter Pettigrew, on the other hand, was living his dream. He had a protector and he had freedom. Freedom to do things his way, within reason, and the ability to live without constantly looking over his

shoulder for Aurors. He had a simple mission: Find the Weasleys and kill them all. It was clear-cut and unambiguous, which made life a great deal easier for him, as thinking was not exactly his strong suit.

It had taken him several months to track down the Weasleys, after finding the Burrow, like many other wizarding homes, had been abandoned and was disturbingly quiet. He was surprised when he eventually did find their modest home, that they had chosen to hide in plain sight among the Muggles, like just one more tree in a forest, instead of moving to a heavily warded estate. It might have worked of course, if the Dark Lord had chosen anyone else for this mission...but he hadn't, and that would be the death-knell for the blood-traitors.

As the first rays of the sun hit the eastern sky, the rat-animagus found himself sitting under a bush, on the edge of what passed for a lawn. The small house had two entrances. The one to the right had a long walkway that led up to it from a smaller, secondary building while the one to the left had but a short set of stairs in front of it and emptied out onto the side of the house by the garden. Pettigrew knew that all that was left to do was to pick the best way in. It was obvious that at least one person was awake and he suspected that it was the Weasley matriarch. Of all the people in the house, she was the one whom he wanted to face least, as she was known to have a temper and might in fact be capable of using the Unforgivables, if pressed to it.

Looking up at the building and seeing that there were no good second-floor entrances to be had, the would-be assassin decided that either of the ground-floor entrances was risky and that he just had to pick one. He opted for the one that had the better approach, which was the one to left.

Making his way from bush to bush, he got as far as the walkway before transforming. A moment after he did so, a bright beam of light that seemed to come from a point above the left-hand door lit up the whole area.

Panicking, the rat took the six steps ahead of him two at a time. With a quick flick of the wrist, he blew the handle off the door and opened it. Unfortunately, doing so created a fair bit of noise – more than was

drowned out by the newscast on the wizarding wireless in the kitchen.

Inside, Molly Weasley was just about to sit down to enjoy another bite of her scone and a swallow of tea when the racket began outside. Taking her wand off the table, she made her way across the kitchen and towards the back door. She was about there when the door blew inwards; knocking her backwards and causing her to scream. That was her last living act. Peter practically screeched "Avada Kedavra!" as he pointed his wand at her. The green death leapt from his wand and snuffed out her life.

It would have been alright for him and he might even have survived if Arthur Weasley hadn't been coming down the stairs at that exact moment. But he was and it placed him directly behind Pettigrew. That was all the advantage Arthur needed. His wand was out before he was consciously aware of having reached for it. The first thing that came to mind was what left his lips: "Avada Vito!"

The sickly red curse struck the rat-animagus square in the back, just to the left of his heart, and like its Unforgivable cousin, caused the balding, twisted, evil sycophant to topple forward, stone dead. The difference was that ever bit of energy; every bit of magical core that Pettigrew possessed in life left his body and was transferred to Arthur.

The transfer took Arthur by surprise, as he had never experienced it before, even though he had been warned about it during his days as a senior Unspeakable. It was a heady experience and he realized that there was a reason that it had been classified by the department as 'Most Secret'.

As his newly expanded magical core began to settle out and his sense of balance returned, Arthur looked down at the body of the woman who had been his wife for so many years.

Kneeling down next to her, his eyes suddenly wet with tears, he rolled her over gently and looked at her face. Gone was the harshness that had plagued her and gone too was the fire that had lit her eyes in so many moments.

"I loved you Molly" he sobbed as he held her now cold hand in his.

He knelt beside her, talking to her, even though her essence was already gone. After he rose, he made his way up the stairs and knocked on his children's doors and when they opened their doors, he gathered them in his arms and told them what had happened and that he loved them....and for a very long time, the rest of the world didn't matter.

Fistral Beach, Newquey, UK, Friday, Sept. 01, 1995 - late morning

There are times when a man just needs to be alone, either because of or irrespective of his duties and his family. Albus Dumbledore was such a man; alone and needing to be so, because of the weight of the world that he felt pressing down upon his shoulders.

As he walked along the surprisingly warm, sandy beach that lay on the leeward side of the Pentire Peninsula, the former Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry thought about the things that had happened and tried to see in them some kind of over-arching pattern or rational. Without his great, runic Pensieve, thoughts – thousands of them – competed for space in his mind and left him unable to discern the one tree that he sought from the thousands of trees around it. It was maddening.

Stopping for a moment, he looked down at the sand between his toes and wondered whether his life any longer mattered at all or if it was truly time to begin thinking about the 'next great adventure'. Everything he had touched recently had either blown up spectacularly in his face – like his plans for Harry – or his attempts to control and guide the loyal Ministry employees and others who had fled into hiding with him when the Ministry and Hogwarts fell.

Above him, a gull squawked and for a moment, his attention fell on the bird as it turned into the wind and let itself be lifted higher into the sky by the early-morning breeze. He watched it bank and dip without apparent effort; it's long, white wings slicing through the air perfectly. 'Abe can do that' he thought, surprised that the observation came without the rancor that he might have felt earlier in the summer.

"Have I grown so old?" he thought to himself as his attention once more fell to the ground by his feet. He knew the answer, but it was something that was hard to acknowledge, especially for a man who

had always defined himself by the enormous powers that he had always wielded.

He was just about to turn and walk back the way he had come when a small, gray owl, no taller than his hand was long, landed softly on his shoulder.

Albus smiled at the owl. "What have you got for me, my feathery friend?" he said softly, as the owl held out his leg and allowed the aging wizard to remove the scroll that was contained within a small, leather tube attached to its right leg.

Not thinking about what he was doing, the Headmaster wandlessly and silently summoned a small, wriggling fish from the sea and fed it to the owl. "Go my friend, and eat well." The owl gave a soft 'hoot' and flew off to a piece of driftwood that stuck up out of the sand near the high-tide mark.

As he watched the owl fly off, his fingers automatically unrolled the piece of parchment. The two, sparse sentences were enough to almost bring him to his knees....and for the first time in a long while, he allowed himself to feel the bitter sting of tears and the sadness of a pain shared.

September 1, 1995 – In the Cathedral of the L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec – 4 pm.

Unlike the great majority of its counter-parts in Europe, L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec had a massive, light gray-green granite cathedral as the main focus of the campus. The building itself, an "almost-twin" of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C, had three sets of tall, magnificently detailed stained-glass windows that were lit best, and most brightly, in the morning sun. Eight feet high each, the three sets of double doors at the front of the church, below each set of windows, were made of solid and extremely rare American Elm (*Ulmus americana*), and they were set with solid brass strappings, fasteners and hinges.

The cathedral itself was an architectural wonder – though it didn't have some of the more interesting features of the one in Washington D.C (such as the fact that there is a sculpture of the dark lord of the Sith, Darth Vader, on top of the National Cathedral's west tower). It was designed by Francis Rattenbury, the famed Canadian architect,

almost immediately after he had been graduated from L'ecole des Sorcier in May, 1884. It was his very first commission - even before he had been asked to design the Parliament Building in Victoria, British Columbia. If asked, the school's principal chaplain told anyone who'd listen that the Cathedral was a testament to Rattenbury's ability to weave wards into every bit of the work, so one never knew where one ward started and another stopped – making it one of the safest and most heavily guarded buildings in all of North America. No force of evil, no matter how determined, would ever get past its great doors.

One of the things that set the school apart from Hogwarts Sirius knew, and had told both Harry and Hermione, was that a great many of the students actively participated in religious activities on campus, which included singing Vespers ('Evensong'), morning prayers, and other religious observances. There was an active Jewish contingent on campus, as well as groups of Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox Christians, Native Americans, and various species of Protestants. It was very much a living, breathing space, as most all used space in the cathedral from time to time, except for the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) (both staff and students), Buddhists, and Sikhs. They created, to the delight of many of the staff, their own beautiful, dedicated spaces in which to practice and continue their faiths; adding to the tremendous diversity on campus.

Along with the other almost seven hundred students (and their parents), Hermione Jane Potter sat twelve rows back in the enormous church with Harry and her parents to her left and Sirius, Septima, Remus, Tonks, and the Twins on the other side as the Headmistress entered the cathedral, at the head of the procession of professors. Each was dressed in his/her (doctoral) alma mater's colors – with the exception of the school's Shaman, who was dressed in the tradition of the Onondaga Tribe - and Hermione thought that they looked wonderful. She saw, to her surprise, both Oxford's and Cambridge College's colors as well as Harvard University's, which she thought were pretty cool, given that it was deep crimson – one of her two favorite colors. She thought it was interesting, as well as ironic, that the wearing of academic regalia was a tradition that originated in Oxford and Cambridge, had become a part of not just colleges, but secondary schools like L'ecole des Sorcier, both in the UK and in most of the rest of the western world.

Once the procession of professors had made its way to the front of the Cathedral, the pipe organ – which Septima had discovered was one of the largest in all of Canada – began playing the Kyrie from Beethoven's Missa Solemnis. The elder Grangers both thought that the music was extremely fitting and were impressed with the restraint that was being shown during the whole ceremony. Harry simply sat and enjoyed holding his wife's hand in his while talking to her across their bond-link. Hermione knew, because she could feel what he was feeling, that he really wanted to be able to stretch out and rest his head on her lap, so that she'd run her fingers through his hair as he drifted off to sleep. Not that he was bored really...but just because good music, along with her touch, always made him content and sleepy. For her part, Hermione thought that there was nothing better than napping together, just as he envisioned it, and that just as soon as the convocation was over, that was exactly what they were going to do. All they had to do was stay awake and attentive enough long to avoid giving offense to their new schoolmates and professors!

Fifty minutes later, the recessional music began and both Harry and Hermione roused themselves to a slightly higher level of wakefulness, so that they could both stand, along with everyone else, as the Headmistress and professorship of the school passed by. Hermione noticed, which she hadn't before, that the school had its own flag – one that complimented both the flag of Quebec - four fleur-de-lis on blue background, against a white cross -and the national flag of Canada – traditional red maple-leaf on white background with red bars. The school's flag was something altogether different. It had a Griffon (rampant) with crossed wands in one claw and the both the maple-leaf and fleur-de-lis in the other, on a white background. Around the Griffon's neck, in the fashion of a necklace, was the magical symbol (as well as Muggle) for eternity – the sideways or 'reposed' figure-eight. It was intended to represent the idea that magic was forever and Harry had earned himself a playful slap on the arm from his young wife when he had taken some pleasure, during the latter-half of one of their long study-sessions, in pointing out that he had gotten to the information first.

It took the crowd a long while to filter out of the cathedral through the three doors and out into the early evening sun. By the time Harry, Hermione, Remus, Sirius, Septima, the Twins, and the Grangers had re-assembled, it was pushing five-thirty.

"Dinner, anyone? I'm starved and I bet the rest of you are as well."

Miranda Granger looked at her husband and nodded. "Where to?"

Hermione grinned. "Vieux Montreal. I know of an absolutely fabulous restaurant on Rue St. Paul est."

Harry looked at her and smiled. He knew exactly the one she was thinking of. It was a very upscale, and completely delicious place to eat; not to mention the atmosphere and the incredible deserts.

"How then?"

"Port key. Harry, want to do the honors?"

Grinning, Harry looked at Sirius and said, "No problem. Anyone have a string?"

"Will this do?" Miranda said, holding up a piece of thread that she had just snatched from her husband's somewhat tatty sport-coat.

Smiling, Harry said. "Only you, Miranda. Only you."

One quick 'Engorgio' later, Harry had enough thread for all of them to hold onto comfortably. Then he did the slightly harder part. Creating a round-trip portkey for this many required a great deal of power and he had to focus. Taking Hermione's hand in his, Harry touched the string and whispered, "Portus". Opening his eyes, he realized that he didn't feel as tired as he expected to.

"I felt that, Harry" Hermione said to him silently.

Before he could get her to explain, Remus (who was always the hungry one in the bunch) said, "Right then. On Three: One, two, Three..."

The blue-and-white vortex of a properly created portkey formed around them and they all felt themselves falling down the proverbial rabbit-hole.

Dawn, September 2, 1995 - 2,924 miles away – Great Hall, Hogwarts Castle

The eagle crossed onto the grounds of Hogwarts silently; its wings making barely a ripple in the wind. The breeze lifted it high into the sky and carried it over the roof of the Great Hall.

Like many post-birds, the eagle was guided by magic and compelled to find its designated target and its target this morning was the dark lord himself. Dipping to one side, the eagle let gravity guide it into a slow, downward spiral until it was able to enter the upper-most window of the Great Hall.

'Lord' Voldemort – a/k/a Tom Riddle Jr. – sat, as he often did, on the throne that was once the seat of Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore; former Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot and current Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards. Around Riddle knelt many of his followers; all of whom were desperate to see whether or not the Goblins were going to cave into their lords' demands and free up the money that they needed in order to return to the lives of privilege that they had expected, once Riddle took over the Kingdom.

The eagle let gravity carry him into the hall, so that he didn't have to flap, except once, in order to release the black, steaming envelope that he carried in his bill.

Once it released the envelope above the dark lord's head, it flew hard for the ceiling, so that it would not be caught in the blast, either figurative or literal, that was coming.

Snatching the envelope from mid-air, Riddle knew that it didn't carry good news. A black envelope from Gringotts always meant either a demand for payment or something worse – a declaration of war.

The envelope opened itself the moment that Riddle touched it and all over the hall, the voice of Ragnock, King of the Goblin clans could be heard.

"TOM RIDDLE, YOU HAVE DECLARED WAR ON THE GOBLIN NATIONS...AND YOUR MEN HAVE FAILED. NOW WE DEMAND THE HEAD OF THOSE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE ATTACK ON OUR HOME OR WE WILL EXACT OUR OWN REVENGE. YOU HAVE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS."

The Hall grew silent as the envelope shredded itself. No one had ever declared war on the dark lord before and not a single one of the Death Eaters knew what his/her lord was going to do. It was completely uncharted territory – but many felt like the walls were suddenly closing in on 'their cause'. The Goblins' previous rebellions had only been put down at great cost, with all of the wizards in England united behind the cause. Now, only 20% of the population was left and that was far from enough to resist the kinds of forces that the Goblins were known or suspected to possess.

Riddle seethed. Not only had his best hope been cast aside or defeated, but his own people had heard the evidence of his failure. He knew, like most generals did, that 90% of winning a war was having both the element of surprise on your side and having troops that were motivated and confident. In one fell swoop, the Goblins had cut the legs out from under him. It was an unmitigated disaster.

Just as he was about to stand and deliver some kind of speech to the sixty or so Death Eaters who were gathered in the Hall, another bird – a very, very large, but nondescript owl – flew into the Hall and dumped a burlap bag at his feet before flying away.

With a flick of his wand, the bag opened and the bloody head of Peter Pettigrew fell out of it. Attached to it, via a dagger stuck through one of the animagus' head, was a note.

He was about to summon the note when Arthur Weasley's voice rang out from the dead man's mouth, magically amplified so that it filled the hall.

"YOU'VE FAILED, RIDDLE. YOU KILLED MY WIFE AND IN RETURN, I'VE KILLED YOUR PATHETIC SERVANT. NOW I, ARTHUR PERCIVAL WEASLEY, ON BEHALF OUR CLAN WEASLEY AND CLAN PREWITT, DECLARE BLOOD WAR AGAINST YOU AND YOUR DECENDENTS, UNTO THE FIFTH GENERATION. FOR HER SAKE, I WILL KILL YOU. YOU ARE A COWARD AND A MURDERER AND NOTHING MORE."

The moment that the voice stopped, the head exploded, sending trans-sonic bits of bone into more than a dozen of Riddle's followers; killing three instantly and wounding a dozen more. Finally, the dark lord had had enough and screamed his frustration. "FIND HIM! KILL

HIM! ALL OF YOU! OUT. DO NOT COME BACK UNTIL HE IS DEAD. FIND HIS CHILDREN AND KILL THEM TOO!"

Those Death Eaters who hadn't already done so scrambled to their feet and made for the doors. It was either that or risk being crucio'd by their master. Not a single one of them disagreed with his order, but his rage sometimes got out of hand – though not a single one of them would ever admit it publicly.

Though the dark lord didn't see them, four ghosts circled the Hall and each had his/her own reasons for wanting to keep an eye on what was happening. They were in agreement on what might very well have to be done and though no one of them regretted the decision, each thought that it was tragic that it had come down to the one final and irrevocable act.

This is the last chapter I am going to write before returning to Vox Corporis: Rebirth. I am determined to finish that story by the end of March, 2010 so that I can move on with this and other stories that I am working on.

As usual, I would ask you to please, please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter ten – "Complications"

By the_scribbler

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER (eventually) SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

Note Two: Most all of the geography described in this particular chapter actually exists. I do a great deal of my research on GOOGLE-EARTH and rely on the pictures and cartography found there to more adequately describe things for this story. If you have a question about a place or thing that I have mentioned, please email me.

Note Three: One exceptionally good (and thoughtful) reviewer caught the fact that I screwed up Sirius Black's name in one of my earlier chapters, calling him Sirius ACTURUS Black (SAB), instead of his REAL name, Sirius ORION Black (SOB). Jeez...nice parents,

eh? Anyway, I'll make sure that I correct that at some point. Also, there was a discrepancy in Chapter three about whether Sirius was a free man or not. IN THIS STORY, HE IS. It was MY screw up (as well as my beta's) that we didn't pick that up earlier on.

Note Four: I know I've read a fanfiction story somewhere in which Harry drinks a special, spiced tea with the Goblins. But I can't find it... If you're the author of that story, please email me so that I can give you proper credit for your original idea. THANK YOU.

Note Five: Last one, I promise! THIS CHAPTER HAS CONSIDERABLE SMUT, BEGINNING ON pp. 18. If you're NOT OF AGE, LEAVE NOW! If YOU'RE JUST A PERVERT, SKIP AHEAD TO PAGE 18. EVERYONE ELSE...ON WITH THE STORY!

From Chapter Nine: "Revelations"

"YOU'VE FAILED, RIDDLE. YOU KILLED MY WIFE AND IN RETURN, I'VE KILLED YOUR PATHETIC SERVANT. NOW I, ARTHUR PERCIVAL WEASLEY, ON BEHALF OUR CLAN WEASLEY AND CLAN PREWITT, DECLARE BLOOD WAR AGAINST YOU AND YOUR DECENDENTS, UNTO THE FIFTH GENERATION. FOR HER SAKE, I WILL KILL YOU. YOU ARE A COWARD AND A MURDERER AND NOTHING MORE."

The moment that the voice stopped, the head exploded, sending trans-sonic bits of bone into more than a dozen of Riddle's followers; killing three instantly and wounding a dozen more. Finally, the dark lord had had enough and screamed his frustration. "FIND HIM! KILL HIM! ALL OF YOU! OUT. DO NOT COME BACK UNTIL HE IS DEAD. FIND HIS CHILDREN AND KILL THEM TOO!"

Those Death Eaters who hadn't already done so scrambled to their feet and made for the doors. It was either that or risk being crucio'd by their master. Not a single one of them disagreed with his order, but his rage sometimes got out of hand – though not a single one of them would ever admit it publicly.

Though the dark lord didn't see them, four ghosts circled the Hall and each had his/her own reasons for wanting to keep an eye on what was happening. They were in agreement on what might very well have to be done and though no one of them regretted the

decision, each thought that it was tragic that it had come down to the one final and irrevocable act.

Early morning, September 01, 1995 – Prime Minister's Office – 10 Downing Street, London, UK

"You understand, Mr. Prime Minister, that the Queen has not issued a 'shoot-to-kill' order since 'the troubles' years ago? And you understand that it was controversial even then?"

"Yes, I do Michael, but these are most definitely not the kinds of domestic terrorists that we're used to dealing with. These people, if everything that Shackbolt says is true – and I have no reason at all to not believe him – would kill you with no more than a wave of their hands – and we've both seen that they can. Tell me that we've ever faced anything like that before."

Michael Heseltine paused for a moment and then ran his fingers nervously through his hair, sweeping it back. It was a habit that he had picked up in his younger days, when his hair was longer and he had yet to break it. "The State of Emergency declaration makes it legal, John. She has the right to do it. All you have to do is make sure that none of our people fuck it up for her."

"Don't I know it, Michael, don't I know it."

Just outside Hogsmeade Village, an hour after dawn, September 02, 1995

Fifteen men, dressed in Death Eater garb, made their way to the outskirts of Hogsmeade Village. They had been ordered by Lucius Malfoy to fan out and find, if they could, Arthur Weasley and all of his children. Not a single one of them knew where to start, but it didn't matter. They had been ordered to 'be creative' and find the Weasleys – all of them – and then kill them painfully, before bringing their heads to the Dark Lord.

Just as they cleared the wards which extended out and around the Castle itself in a vast circle, the men fanned out, preparing to apparate away. Unfortunately, not a single one of them noticed the tiny red dots that suddenly appeared on all but one of their chests. It wouldn't have mattered if they had noticed them really, but it might have given them a couple of seconds warning to do something. But

they didn't and that was that. Fifteen fifty-caliber, reduced-Uranium-coated, copper-cored slugs, traveling at just under 2,900 feet per second slammed into the group, killing all but one instantly. The lone survivor was knocked to the ground, the upper, left-hand part of his chest missing. It took him three long, agonizing minutes to die.

Seven hundred and fifty meters away, teams of SAS snipers confirmed their kills and then slipped back into the darkness, to await further orders. The seven, two-man teams were sure that they would be back, given the few details that had been shared with them, but they were 'officially' ordered not to speculate about why they had been ordered to do what they had just done or what they might be ordered to do in the near future. The tall, black man who had briefed them was quite adamant about that. The fact that it had been the Deputy Prime Minister himself who had given them their orders was unsettling, each thought, but each man served God, Queen, and Country and that was all there was to it.

Less than an hour later, in the Hogs Head Inn

"Abe! Come quick!"

Aberforth Dumbledore wasn't sure what was wrong or why he was being summoned, but didn't waste time trying to get the story out of his barmaid, Melinda. He grabbed his winter cloak and followed her out the door and towards the path which led back to the Castle; a path that he had traveled much at all since Riddle's take-over, but knew well anyway, since his brother had been the Headmaster for so long.

When they rounded the last corner in the path before it opened up into the road which led down from the Castle, Aberforth was taken aback.

Walking among the bodies, the old man looked at the holes which had been neatly drilled in each. Then he turned and looked around. "Lumos!" he said silently. His wand-tip flared with light and all of the trees on each side of the road were illuminated as if it were noon. One tree in particular caught his attention. Gnarled and twisted with age, it was a large Sessile oak, with a massive indentation in the middle of the trunk and bark missing all around it. Aberforth smiled. "Accio bullet" he thought, pointing his wand in the general direction of the tree. A piece of badly deformed metal flew out of the tree and

into his hand. It looked a mushroom that had been stepped on, with jagged edges all around it. The copper core was smashed outwards in all directions, but otherwise identifiable.

"So the Muggles have gotten involved? Interesting. That's going to change things a great deal."

"What happened?" Melinda asked hesitantly.

"Nothing you need to worry about, love" he said. "Obliviate"

Wiping her memories of the bodies, the bullet-holes, and everything else connected with the gruesome scene, Aberforth replaced them with nice memories of warm tea and scones with Melinda's mother and aunt, and then sent her back to the Hogs' Head. He knew she'd be alright, given that she and her entire family were pure-bloods, albeit very poor and weakly magical pure-bloods, with whom Riddle and his followers couldn't be bothered.

There was a great deal to do if he was going to successfully clean up the area, so that there were no traces of either the Death Eaters themselves or their fate. It would confound Riddle for some time and perhaps buy some time for the 'good guys' to rally their forces.

As he walked back to the Hog's Head, Aberforth thought about the position he was in. With Robert's help or with Arthur's help, he thought that he might be able to hold out for a little while longer within Hogsmeade – though he wondered what might happen if one of the slightly smarter Death Eaters figured out that Aberforth had to have contacts... food contacts in the Muggle world and was therefore useful to them.

It was an interesting conundrum, because his personal motivation to help dispose of Riddle and all those who supported him pushed him in the direction of wanting to be as 'close to the action' as possible. What he didn't want was to be accidentally targeted by the Muggles, who had obviously taken a sudden, keen, and bloody interest in Riddle's forces.

The other thing that weighed on his mind was the possibility that his brother might return with his own forces to attack the Castle. If that came to be, he knew he'd want to be close in order to help, for no

one, he was certain, knew the Castle better than him and his brother, and that knowledge could be a significant asset in a pitched battle.

As he entered the Inn, his mind turned to what he was going to have to do in order to better protect his resources and hide those things that might be either confiscated, used against him, or get him killed. That meant lots of trips from his first storage cave to his 'cave of last resort', which was far less convenient, but far more secure.

Three days prior - Thursday, August 31, 1995 – On the shore of Lake St. George, north-east of downtown Toronto

In the early evening light, as she looked out across the water, Bethany St. Bertrand saw nothing but reeds and bushes all about, and wondered if someone hadn't, in fact, pranked her. Looking down at the card that she held in her hand, she re-read the line that said,

"Please present yourself for greeting at the shore of Lake St. George, at the spot where the road ends. Someone will come and collect you. Thank you, Lipcutter; Customer Relations, Gringotts-Toronto"

Bethany had lived in Canada all her life and had seen a great number of weird goings-on, but this one, she thought, probably took top marks.

Just as she was about to turn around and her way back up the slightly slippery slope, to a spot from whence she could disappear more safely, a man came walking towards her... across the surface of the water. He was wearing dark blue, dress work robes, similar to what members of the Wizengamot wore, with a warrior-braid at the back of his head, and was carried a long, oak staff with an irregularly shaped crystal on the top. He reminded her of Gandalf the White from the Lord of the Rings, which was one of her favorite Muggle books, but without the inimitable style of Ian McKellen.

Bethany, no stranger to situations that required the somewhat forceful use of magic, carefully drew her wand and prepared for whatever was coming. Because of her nervousness, it felt like a very, very long time before the man was face to face with her, though she knew it hadn't been.

"Bethany?" he asked, as if he might have been expecting someone else.

"Yes? And you are?" She replied, slightly defensively.

"I am called 'The Keeper'. I was told that you would be here and I've come 'round to collect you."

Bethany took a step backward and her wand was up and pointing between the man's eyes even before she realized that she had done it. "Told by whom?" The flick of her wand made it clear that she was expecting a straight answer, without prevarication.

Putting down the staff, the man looked at her and said, "Be at peace, Bethany. I was sent by Toothbender to collect you. It seems that whomever your friend is, he's a damn sight more important than anyone with whom they're used to dealing. He has my Goblin-friends in a right quiver. I've never seen anything like it, really."

Her wand lowered at name and she felt herself relax. "Ok. Where to?"

"May I?" He asked, pointing down to his staff.

She nodded and he bent over, somewhat slowly, to pick it up. It looked to her as if it was an inordinately heavy magical staff, given that it rose four to six full inches above the man's head.

"Let's be off then. Toothbender wants this done quickly and I've no mind to keep you or him waiting."

Turning, so that he was by her side instead of in front of her, he inscribed a half-circle with the staff and then waited. In a moment, a small island began to rise out of the center of the lake and a long, almost translucent walkway appeared above the water; leading from the shoreline out to the new island.

She marveled at the magic involved in such enchantments and wondered how long it had taken the wizards or Goblins involved to create the right conditions or rituals necessary to make such magic permanent.

The Keeper lead the way, out over the water and towards the island. Bethany was unnerved by the movement of the lake's surface under the almost transparent walkway and resolved to find another way to bank with Gringotts if getting to her accounts meant having to repeat the process of walking across the lake. She had no idea how deep the lake was, and no desire at all to find out.

It was almost a third of a mile to the center of the lake and the magical island and she had never, ever been so grateful to set foot on dry land before.

Her relief, she thought, as she stepped off the magical walkway, must have been completely evident on her face. "Takes a little getting used-to, eh?"

Bethany nodded and then smiled. The Keeper had come from western Canada – B.C or the Yukon – given his accent and vocal mannerisms, and they struck as somewhat funny. "That's a two-way street, eh?" she thought to herself. There were things about Quebecois that she knew Parisian French thought were very, very funny – not the least of which was the acknowledged bastardization of the 'mother' language.

She kept her opinions to herself as they walked towards the center of the island and to the small, flat, square, granite tablet, approximately six feet by six feet, which rose up magically at a flick of The Keeper's hand.

"Our transportation awaits" he said, when he saw her curious expression.

Holding out a hand, he helped her up onto the platform. Once she was by her side, he said "Dwarrowdelf !" and she felt the incredible tug of a Goblin-made portkey.

The land under her feet came up hard; jarring her entire body and almost knocking the wind out of her. "Wah! Where are we?"

The Keeper turned and held out a hand to help steady her. She accepted it and took a moment to get her bearings. "You are at the secure arrival point for Gringotts-Toronto."

She looked around; taking in the fact that they were in what appeared to be a massive, man-made or at least Goblin-made cave. The ceiling seemed to be at least 45 feet high and lit at regular intervals. It was huge, too. It went on for a very long way; so much so that she knew that she could not see the other end. There were walkways that lined the cave and doors that seemed to go off to the right and left, every four to six feet. They were standing in a fairly wide, unadorned area, with a floor that looked like it was made of black, igneous Basalt or something similar. It was polished, which surprised her, and there wasn't a bit of dust or dirt to be seen anywhere.

Getting her head around the fact that she had been transported a fairly long way, she turned to The Keeper and said, "May I ask a question?"

He smiled and said, "I bet you want to know why all the misdirection. Why we use the lake-entrance."

Bethany looked sheepish. "That obvious?"

The Keeper chuckled. "It's pretty standard."

"How big is this place?"

"Bigger than a Quidditch pitch, but smaller than a city" he said, still smiling.

Bethany sighed. "Serves me right for expecting much detail..."

"If it helps, remember with whom you're dealing. Have the Goblins ever given you a straight answer, if they didn't have to?"

She shook her head and then after a moment said, "How did you get to be the front-man?"

"Long story. Not sure if it was right place, wrong time or wrong place, right time. Either way though, it's worked out."

"When am I going to meet Toothbender?" she asked, suddenly realizing, with a little bit of trepidation, that she might be wasting the man's time with inane questions.

"He knows you're here. Give it time. A great deal of work had to go into your benefactor's request and it can't just be thrust at you without explanation."

Bethany thought it odd that Harry Potter was referred to as her 'benefactor'. Usually the term referred to someone, much like an artists' patron, who took a specific and ongoing interest in your life and work and did what he/she could to support that work, so long as it was either generally or specifically in the benefactor's interest to do so. She wondered silently what she had accomplished in the previous thirty or so years that might warrant the interest of someone as powerful and connected as the new Lord Black or, for that matter, Harry Potter.

It was true that she had had a significant hand in treating patients who were otherwise thought to be beyond the reach of magic to heal and it was also true that she had secured much more favorable outcomes for many of her patients than had ever been thought possible, but she wondered if any of that was enough to bring upon her the kind of attention that she was being shown. Her mind drifted for several minutes and The Keeper, whatever his name really was, didn't seem to mind the silence.

Somewhere, a chime sounded, and a very bright blue-and-white light suddenly appeared in front of them, in a classical vortex pattern. Surprisingly, Bethany felt no urge at all to draw her wand or take any kind of precautions, as she otherwise might have felt anywhere else.

The vortex settled out and then disappeared altogether, leaving behind three very well-dressed Goblins. The one to her visual left was holding what looked very much like a Muggle businessman's briefcase. The three stepped forward, allowing The Keeper time to pick up his staff, straighten his robes, and set himself properly for what was about to happen.

Bethany quickly tried to make herself presentable as well, though she knew that her dress was less than what she thought it ought to be when meeting with the leadership of Gringotts. The Goblin in the middle looked at her once, up and down, and then said, "Bethany St. Bertrand, born of Guillaume St. Bertrand and Celeste Forchet, well met this night."

Bethany tried to remember her all of her lessons in etiquette when dealing with Goblins in a half-second and prayed that she got it right. She executed her most careful and most dignified curtsy. "My Lord Goblin, well met indeed. May your coffers ever overflow and your enemies tremble before you."

Impressed with her polite manner, the Goblin, whom she hoped was Toothbender, said "Rise, friend. You are sent to us by most extraordinary circumstances."

Not daring to make eye contact until given leave to do so, Bethany said "Thank you, my Lord. I wish I knew more of the circumstances about which you speak, but I fear that I have only the one card that Harry Potter sent to me."

The 'chief' Goblin, if that was what he truly was, smiled a toothy smile. "Come with us, please. What must be done cannot be done here."

Not having any other choice really, given the circumstances in which she found herself, Bethany St. Bertrand fell into step next to The Keeper, directly behind the 'chief' Goblin, as he turned on his heel and started walking towards a corridor behind them that she had not noticed until she was facing it head-on. What she was facing, she didn't know, but she was curious enough that turning and running from the situation wasn't an option – even if she knew where she was or out to get out.

Two minutes' walk took them to a large, plushly appointed conference room, which was dominated by a long, rectangular table that occupied three-quarters' of the room's length and over half of its width. At the far end and off to one side was a speakers' podium and behind it, squarely against the wall, was what looked suspiciously like a Muggle projector screen. She wondered to herself, as she stared at it, just how many Muggle habits or accouterments the Goblins had adopted in order to further their own business.

At the near end of the room was another set of chairs, all set so they faced each other. There was a smaller table between them, and on it, some Goblin as well as human refreshments, as well as a small, ceremonial bowl of some sort. Bethany assumed, though she didn't immediately say anything, that the circle of chairs was where they would be accommodated.

"Please sit, Ms. Bertrand" The 'chief' Goblin said to her. She did so, but only after he had already done so.

"Thank you, my Lord Goblin. I wish every human could observe the rules of hospitality as well as you do."

Though he didn't say anything immediately in response, there was a moment of particular brightness that seemed to shine in his eyes as Bethany looked at him for the first time. He was taller than his comrades by several inches at least and his vestments were of a finer material than she had ever seen on any other Goblin – though, she admitted to herself, she hadn't seen very many Goblins over the years and the ones she had seen, who were Tellers at Gringotts-Montreal, probably were not indicative at all of the rest of their fellows.

Doing as the Goblin-chief did, Bethany poured some Goblin spiced tea for herself; adding the appropriate one-half teaspoon of honey into it, and then squeezing the juice of one of the small Miruvor berries into it. Once she was done with the ritual part of the tea preparation, she brought it to her lips, turning the cup three times as she did so, and then drank it in one go.

Goblin tea was not meant for humans even if, occasionally, certain humans (like notoriously boastful hit-wizards) chose to drink it before or after a battle. It was potent stuff and even though she had prepared mentally for the reaction, Bethany could feel its fire lighting up her system in a way that Firewhiskey just couldn't match.

The Goblins sitting around the circle watched her, amazed that such a slip of a girl would take tea with them in Goblin fashion. They were even more amazed when she finally looked up with a smile on her face and said, "That, my Lord Goblin, is amazing."

From the moment she said it, things became much more congenial and smiles appeared on the other Goblins' faces.

Finally, the 'chief' Goblin said, "You have surprised us, Ms. Bertrand, and we are not beyond appreciating being surprised in such a manner. It was not expected that you would know the Goblin tea-ceremony or would have the courage to drink it with us. Perhaps Lord Gryffindor was right in making his offer to you."

Bethany was thunderstruck. "Lord Gryffindor?" she thought to herself. "Harry Potter is Lord Gryffindor? That makes him senior to every other magical house in the United Kingdom, as well as to all but two in France and two in Germany."

The confusion was etched plainly on her face, which her host took to mean that she had not worked out the details in her own mind. "Ms. Bertrand, I'm sorry if I have confused you. Let me speak plainly for a moment, so that there isn't a misunderstanding of what is supposed to happen here today."

"Please, my Lord."

"Please call me Toothbender, Ms. Bertrand"

"Bethany please, my Lo...Toothbender" She caught herself and then blushed with the embarrassment that she felt in calling him by his tribal name.

"I am the Senior Chief of Gringotts-Canada, Bethany, and as such deal with only the most sensitive and/or largest accounts. Harry Potter, Lord Gryffindor, is one such account. He asked us to do something special for him – something we have never done before – and because of who he is and our peculiar relationship with him and his family over the centuries, we chose to help. Because of how you have honored us today and the respect that you have shown, we are pleased to have said yes to Lord Gryffindor. Now, as to what is supposed to happen here..." He took out a scroll and passed it to her. Unfurling it, she read:

Dearest Bethany:

If you are reading this, it means that you have made it safely to Gringotts-

Toronto and into the hands of my friend, Toothbender. The reason that Hermione and I decided to go to the lengths that we have is that we would very much like it if you would consider joining us in our fight against Tom Riddle, Jr. – the man you know as Voldemort. You have skills we desperately need and frankly, we'd much rather have you working with us and for our cause than being only intermittently challenged at Le Hospital Universite Laval.

Now, as to our offer: Hermione and I have placed in the Codex which Toothbender is currently holding, all of the healing spells and counter-curses that have been accumulated in the Potter and Gryffindor Grimoires since they were first created. It's a very long book...

In addition, we have convinced Madame Poppy Pomfrey, the Senior Healer from Hogwarts, who is now working for us, to contribute all of her medical learning since she started into medicine, more than one hundred years ago. I think you'll appreciate how she managed to accomplish that bit of magic.

I am sure you are now wondering what the 'catch' is – what is the price that you must pay in order to get your hands on the Codex. It's simple really, but whether it is worth it to you will be an altogether different matter. You must give up your family name and swear your allegiance, by witches' blood-oath, to House Potter-Gryffindor. Simply put, you will become my vassal, with all that entails. It's not the way I would have preferred to do things, but there is no other way to allow you access to the Codex. It can be opened only by one of Potter or Gryffindor blood.

It's not an easy choice, Bethany, but I hope you will consider it strongly. We need you.

Regards,

Harry Potter

Hermione Potter

Bethany sat, stunned at what she had just read. It wasn't at all what she had expected, though in truth, she hadn't really known what she had been expecting. Certainly it wasn't this. Gold, perhaps. Gems, unlikely but not implausible... but not a treasured codex filled with magic unavailable anywhere else in the world.

She could feel all the eyes in the room upon her and it was uncomfortable. Being asked to make a decision of such magnitude, under time pressure, made her feel very much alone and unsure of herself.

Unable to take it, she blurted out, "What would you do?"

Toothbender looked at her, surprised that she would ask the question. "Why do you want to know?"

"I'm scared" she admitted, quietly.

"Understandable"

"And I don't know how my parents are going to feel if I no longer carry their name. I'm an only child..."

Toothbender grasped the core of the problem immediately. Humans, he had learned, often limited themselves to only one or two children, and so every single one was precious. More so because there wasn't an ingrained cultural expectation of adoption, in the event that a father had only girls or if his only son somehow died before the son could have sons.

"Are your parents mundanes or magical?" Toothbender asked, not really sure of the answer.

"My mother is magical, my father's not."

"Then you must decide which world will be your home. Decide that and your decision here, today, is made."

Almost in an instant, Bethany knew that Toothbender was right. If she was Muggle in her heart, then she would keep her family name and forsake what had been offered. Being magical meant taking up the challenge of what had been offered. She chose without really needing to think about it more. Magic had always been a part of her life and she couldn't just give it up. "I'll do it" she said.

Toothbender nodded. "Very good. Lord Gryffindor will be pleased."

"What do I have to do?"

"Let me assist you, daughter" The Keeper said softly. Bethany looked at him, as if to say, 'please'.

"Take this knife" he said, handing her a double-bladed, ornately carved silver dagger, "and cut your palm this way". He made a

motion with his own hands to indicate a slicing motion. "You don't have to go deep. We just need a little of your blood for the ritual. I'll heal you immediately after it's completed."

Trembling with fear of anticipated pain, Bethany drew the knife across her palm. She was surprised how sharp the blade was and how easily it cut her flesh. Soon, a bright line of blood sprang up. The moment that it did so though, she began to feel the pain of it. It was a very sharp sting that began eating at her nerves and made her want to cry.

Gently, The Keeper turned her palm over and let the blood drip into the bowl. When he was satisfied with the volume, he turned her hand back over and wandlessly, silently, healed her hand.

She looked at him with a grateful smile, which made him nod and smile in return. "You were brave, Bethany. That was well done" he said in a low whisper.

Toothbender took the blood-filled bowl and began incanting magic in a language for which she had no name. It made the bowl glow red, then gold, and then bright red again. When he finished, there was left behind a reddish aura around the bowl.

"Take the bowl in your hands Bethany, and swear your oath. Your magic and ours will tell if it is enough."

As bad as she had been in her Theories of Magic course, Bethany immediately recognized that she was about to do something extremely dangerous. The wrong oath might permanently bind her magic or worse, kill her outright. She had to think about the oath and then cast it, leaving no room for error.

Lifting up the bowl with both hands, Bethany stared into the pool of blood and raw magic and then said, "I, Bethany Ann Saint-Bertrand, of my own will, renounce the name Saint Bertrand forever, and take the name Bethany Ann Potter-Gryffindor, and pledge to my new house my heart, my loyalty and my magic, in this life and in the next. So I say, So Mote it Be!"

There was a massive flare in her aura, as the magic and blood in the bowl suffused her as well as the Codex that lay on the table in front

of her. When it died down, Bethany found herself holding the empty bowl, unknowing what to do next.

The Keeper reached over and gently took the bowl from her hands and set it down next to the Codex. "Pick it up, Bethany" Toothbender said to her.

She began to reach for the bowl. "No, Bethany. Pick up the Codex. If your oath worked, you should be able to touch it now."

Very hesitantly, as she came out of her reverie, Bethany touched one finger to the book. When there was no untoward reaction, she grew bolder and put her whole, open hand on the book. It felt like really good-quality leather and it felt warm, as if it were somehow alive.

"Pick it up, Bethany" The Keeper said encouragingly. "Your oath must have sufficed. We're all interested to hear what Lord Gryffindor has done, if you're able to tell us."

Bethany smiled shyly. She wasn't used to being in the spotlight so dramatically and it unnerved her. Reaching out, she took the book by both hands and lifted it up, so that it rested on her lap. It had on its cover, inscribed in pure gold, the shield and motto "Cervus laccessitus leo" ("The Stag at bay becomes a Lion"). Bethany didn't understand the motto, but realized that there was a very great deal that she didn't know about Harry Potter. Being a part of the family meant that she really ought to learn as much as she could, she knew, and as soon as was practicable.

She opened the book and looked on the inside cover and saw that it was inscribed with a hand-written note:

"Welcome to the family, Bethany. May Merlin protect you and may God bless you always."

Bethany blushed, unused to being addressed so. Looking up, she saw that her every move was being watched. "It's beautiful" she said. "Harry wrote me a note and then signed it. I can't wait to see what's in here."

"Bethany, there is one more thing that we were requested to give you and I would be remiss if I failed to put it into your hands"

Toothbender said, holding out a small envelope. Bethany took it from him; thanking him once again.

She peeled back the flap and emptied the contents of the envelope into her hand. It was a Gringotts key. "But I already have an account key?" she said, shaping her words into a question.

"Ay, you do Bethany, but I think that perhaps your previous account wasn't sufficient for your new Lord's needs." Toothbender's statement caught her off-guard and she looked at him quizzically. In response, he pushed at her a small pile of documents, printed on fine, official-looking paper. "These might help you understand the situation better. Your Lord has asked us to make a transfer to your account and doing so required that you have a new vault."

Bethany scanned the paperwork, looking for the 'bottom line'. Accounting was one of the things that she had been required to take during her studies to become a registered Healer, so that she would be equipped to run her own practice if that day came. When she found the number she thought she was looking for, she gasped loudly and sat back in her chair.

Toothbender looked at her and smiled his best 'banker' smile. "We will be pleased to help you with any administrative issues you might have in managing your resources. Such a change in one's financial position usually takes some getting used to we've found, as well as some professional advice. Lord Gryffindor has asked us to extend to you every courtesy on that front."

"Toothbender. If my Lord trusts you, I trust you. I just need..."

The elder Goblin nodded. It was a great deal to take in. Not only had the young woman been gifted with an extraordinary magical gift and inheritance, but she had been put in charge of wealth that she had not ever expected. Humans, especially female humans, were fragile emotionally. It was the species' great weakness and the thing that make Goblin-Human relations very difficult at times. They were, however, extremely capable magically and that, as they say, made up for a great many of their weaknesses.

Bethany bowed her head and then looked at all of the other Goblins who had sat during the entire ritual saying nothing. "Thank you all for being here today. I am in your debt. If ever you should need a

healer, I swear on my magic that I owe you a favor. A bright, twinkling light swirled around her for a moment, sealing her promise to them.

It was a rash thing to do, Bethany knew, but it felt right given all that had been done for her and the incredible amount of time that had obviously gone into creating the Codex that sat in her lap. Her mother would probably scold her for a long while for having done it, but it was that or leave the meeting with the Goblins feeling like she hadn't done the proper thing in acknowledging her obligation to them.

Standing up, Toothbender looked at her eye to eye and said, "You honor us, Bethany. We accept your pledge." Turning, he said "Keeper, see to it that no harm comes to her as she travels home."

Standing as well, he nodded, understanding that the meeting was over. Bethany stood, Codex in hand, bowed to Toothbender, and then placed her hand on The Keeper's arm. In an instant, they were gone; leaving the bank behind.

Early Tuesday afternoon, September 19, 1995, on the football pitch behind the Natatorium at L'ecole Magique du Quebec.

Just over two weeks into the Fall soccer season saw Hermione Potter running full-out to catch up with the striker who had crossed mid-field with the ball. A tall, lithesome girl, Hannah Christine Abbott had been one of her best friends since their first days at Hogwarts together, as well as one of her intellectual rivals for the top academic spot at school. Hannah had many natural charms, including incredibly long legs, a trim, perfect figure (including a gorgeous arse that Hermione both envied and seriously lusted after), flowing brown/auburn hair, and a grace that came with both genes and hard work. Hermione, on the other hand, had two things that Hannah could never have: immense, even staggering natural magical power and wealth beyond the girls' ability to comprehend. As a bonus, she also had the unfathomably deep and unquestioned love of Harry James Potter.

The team had been broken into two squads for the scrimmage, with Hermione and Hannah on separate teams. Hannah's team was playing a '3-4-3' set-up (three defenders, four midfielders and three strikers) against Hermione's team's '5-4-1' set-up, which would then flow (they hoped) into a fast-moving '2-4-4' formation that could and

would overwhelm the other team's defenses. It was risky, but with the right people, often worked brilliantly.

Just as she crossed mid-field, Hannah executed a perfect fake-out of the defender, Pavarti Patil, who had come up the field to challenge her. It left the beautiful Indian girl stunned that she could be beaten so easily and having to back-pedal like mad in order to get back into a better defensive position.

Hermione was just catching up with Hannah on the far side of the field, half-way to the goal, when the whistle blew, signaling the end of the first half. They were playing under the Men's rules, which set the length at thirty minutes per half, with a three-minute intermission, as opposed to the Women's rules which set the halves at twenty-five minutes each. It was more strenuous, but gave the girls on the team a sense of pride that they weren't 'cut any breaks' or treated as less-than-equal to the men.

As they huddled up, Hermione noted with pride that there hadn't been either a yellow card or red card issued for either side during the scrimmage. There was no reason to play dirty she thought. Harry would be disappointed in her if she did and that was the standard that she held herself to always.

Just as she was about to grab a bottle of water, she felt the soft touch of Harry's thoughts in hers. "Miss you, love. Wish I could be there."

"Love you too, Harry. Wish you were here right now. My legs are beginning to ache."

"I'll be there in a few. We're almost done here with our practice."

"You alright?"

"Nothing your touch won't heal, love."

"Harry! Please...don't do that to me! Are you alright or not?"

Hermione felt her husband's laughter in her mind and then saw his image in a mirror as he let her share his eyes. His hair was no longer black, but rather a fairly shocking green, and his ears were

flapping on their own, as if trying to achieve flight on their own. Other than that, he looked fine.

Despite herself, Hermione laughed. She had seen Harry hurt so badly that she thought he was going to die, so green hair and flapping ears seemed like no hurt at all. "I love you, Harry. I...I need you."

"I need you too, love. Soon, I'll be there soon."

Hermione was so tempted just to bail out and apparate to Harry that she had to actively fight it. Thinking about him made her wet and horny in ways that she was positive should be illegal. That she knew he was feeling the same way towards her made it that much worse. "Harry! Oh God, please come and fuck me"

She barely heard the air-horn blow, signaling the start of the second half. All she knew was that there were hands on her upper arms, pulling her back onto the field. The wetness between her legs was very distracting and it didn't help at all, as they all ran out onto the field, that she could see Hannah's delicious ass and her long legs moving smoothly, sexually, in a flowing motion in front of her. Like Hermione, Hannah was on the cusp of sixteen, but with a body that more resembled a 17 or 18 yr. old.

Hermione had always liked boys, first as friends and companions, and then in the last year, sexually, but had only begun to understand at the beginning of her forth (and last) year at Hogwarts how much she desired girls as well. Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet and Katie Bell had all warmed her bed during the school year, as had the Head girl who, Hermione thought smugly, truly earned the title, but none of them really been interested in keeping the relationship on-going. Katie and Angelina, because of their growing desires to bag one or both of the Weasley Twins, (when asked about her sexual preference, Katie would answer 'as much as I can get') and the head girl because of her need to focus all of her energies on passing her five N.E.W.T exams. Alicia had finally bailed on their relationship because she was jealous of Hermione's relationship with Harry and didn't know what to do about it.

Harry knew all about Hermione's predilection and had assured her repeatedly and enthusiastically, as well as horizontally, that it absolutely did NOT bother him. His reassurances had been a major

relief for her, as she had worried that it would hurt their bond if he knew how easily and complete turned on she was by both genders.

Hermione was so lost... so wrapped up in her desire for Harry, that when the end of the game came and her side won, she couldn't describe what had actually transpired. All she knew was that at some point, Harry had shown up. His hair was no longer the violent green that it had been when she had seen it during their talk, but his ears were still trying to fly and be free.

Much to the excitement of the English-born students on the team, their coach, Alice Revie, was the daughter of the famous soccer ('football') coach Don Revie, who had coached Leeds United in the early 1970's. Hermione was far too young to really understand why that might be important, but she accepted the fact that the woman seemed to really know what she was doing. After some final bits of wisdom and commentary on how they had played, Revie ordered Hermione's squad to pair up with a girl from the other squad and go through their cool-down, partner-stretches. Hermione took advantage of the situation and quickly partnered up with Hannah.

Harry sat off to the side as Hermione and Hannah helped each other work through each stretching exercise and quietly admired his wife's fabulous body as she was twisted and turned by Hannah into each new position.

Towards the end, the girls sat down on the grass, legs together and straight, with their feet pressed against the other's, and then held hands. This forced them to lean forward, which was the point of the exercise. It helped to stretch out the muscles in the lower back if done carefully. Hermione, as tired as she was, was very careful because she knew from personal experience that a back injury was excruciatingly painful and she had no desire to feel that type of pain a second time.

The alternative exercise was done with legs spread wide in a 'V', so that their feet were barely touching. Hermione had Harry sit next to her while she and Hannah went through it. Though he was certainly not a genius, Harry quickly figured out why Hermione liked the exercise. He had a perfect view right up Hannah's shorts. "Like that?" Hermione said across their bond. "I know I do."

"You're wicked, you know that?"

"Pfffffffffffffffffffff. You want to feel her up just as much as I do."

Harry had no retort for that, as it was true. His one great fetish, if it could be called that, was seeing (and touching) girls in their knickers...and he was getting a wonderful view of Hannah's perfect white cotton knickers, just as Hermione was.

Harry's erection, which had been throbbing earlier, returned to that state full force and it was pushing painfully against his khakis. "Can I take you home now, please?"

"Almost done, love. You sure you want to go home though? We could do it in the shower in the locker room, if you don't mind the others watching."

Hannah, for her part, knew where Harry and Hermione's eyes had been and was getting off on the thought. She loved the fact that Hermione and her boyfriend seemed to like her body enough to watch her the way they did. Her needs aside, it was nice to be appreciated that way by the two sexiest, most powerful students she knew she'd ever meet.

As she and Hermione continued stretching, she wondered if Harry was dreaming about getting into her knickers or if he was one of those who just liked seeing her in her knickers. She wondered idly if it wasn't worth taking the chance and pulling Hermione aside to find out just how interested he or they actually were. Hannah wasn't any good at reading peoples' auras and she had a very healthy respect for what the girl had shown herself to be capable of doing in their DADA class, and she knew that if she had guessed wrong, things could get ugly (and painful) for her. "She certainly is protective of him, that's for sure. Don't want to get her mad at me"

It was Hermione's birthday, though Hannah didn't know it, and the party that Harry, et al. had planned for her wasn't supposed to start until 7:30 pm. Thinking quickly, Harry realized that if he moved things along, He might just have three or so hours to give his beautiful wife a totally unexpected present.

"Love? Can I talk to Hannah for a moment?"

"About?"

"Just never you mind, miss I-want-to-know-everything"

"Harry! Not *everything*, just _most_things!"

"That's another reason that I love you, Hermione."

"And I love you. So yes, you can talk to Hannah. Be good!"

"As Mae West said love, 'When I'm good, I'm good, but when I'm bad...I'm better!'"

"Go, before I decide that I have to punish you for bad movie references."

"Going!"

Hannah was oblivious to the conversation that has passed between Harry and Hermione, and in any case, would not have immediately believed that such communication was even possible. However, she did notice that Harry and Hermione were touching...or rather, that Harry was touching Hermione with one hand, and their eyes were no longer their normal color, but rather had turned completely milky-white. What she could feel though was the enormous power that was rolling off the pair. It was like standing next to the magical equivalent of a blast-furnace and it made her wonder just how strong the relationship was between the two.

Just as she was steeling herself to interrupt them and ask the question that had sprung to mind, their power backed off and their eyes returned to their normal colors – iridescent, almost violently green for him and deep brown for her.

Harry smiled at her and then said, "Got a moment?"

Surprised, Hannah stuttered, "Ye...yes, I do"

"Good, come with me and we'll talk"

Harry began walking a little ways down the pitch and Hannah quickly followed; not wanting to miss an opportunity to talk to him. When Harry finally stopped, Hannah saw that they were about fifty feet

from where Hermione was standing and that she was watching them intently.

Reaching out, Harry took Hannah's hands in his own and let his magic suffuse and surround her as he looked at her intently. "Hannah, I'm going to ask you two questions and I want you to be truthful with me."

She returned his gaze and said softly, "Ok."

"Good. First, do you like girls?"

She wanted to evade the question or at least not have to answer it with a yes or no, but she found that his magic wouldn't let her. "Yes"

"See? That was easy. Now, my second question: If you had a chance to have sex with Hermione, would you take it?"

If her knickers weren't soaked before, they became that way as she thought about doing to Hermione all of the things that she wanted the beautiful brunette to do to her. Then she thought about Harry and Hermione doing things to her and she almost came. "Yes"

"Good. Today is Hermione's sixteenth birthday and I can't think of a better present than you, naked, on the bed."

"And you want me...?" she said anxiously.

"Yup..." he said, grinning.

"Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!" Hannah was practically gushing, she was so excited.

"Ready to go home love?" Harry said to his beloved.

"Yes! Gods, get me home and fuck me already."

"You ready for your first birthday surprise?" he asked, letting his self-satisfied laughter ring in her thoughts.

Rather than say anything further, Hermione took a half-step and then disappeared, so that she was standing next to him again. Hannah looked at her with undisguised desire and seeing the look

on her friends' face, she realized what Harry had probably asked their beautiful blonde classmate.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready" Both Hermione and Hannah replied, each grinning.

Hermione and Harry had side-alonged enough people that they were comfortable doing it and knew when the other was preparing to make the transition. Each put his/her hand on Hannah and in an instant, taken her into the void that is apparition-space.

Less than a minute later, Hannah found herself inside one of the nicest bedrooms that she had ever seen. The four-poster bed was king-sized at the minimum and looked more comfortable and inviting than any bed she had ever seen close-up. It was done in muted greens and golds, which somewhat surprised her, as she expected something brighter. Why, she didn't know, but she did.

"Where are we?"

"Our bedroom" Hermione replied without hesitation.

The look of surprise on Hannah's face replaced the one of lust that had graced it while they were on the soccer pitch. Harry looked at her and then looked at Hermione. Hermione nodded once and then Harry said, "Hannah...look at me."

She turned and looked in his eyes. "Hannah, Hermione said 'our bedroom' because Hermione is my wife and bond-mate."

If Voldemort himself had walked into the room, Hannah could not have been more surprised. It was a bombshell secret of enormous proportion; probably the biggest thing to which she had ever been privy.

"What...? WHEN?"

"June nineteenth"

"How have you kept this secret? Everyone at school thinks that the two of you are boyfriend/girlfriend or at most, affianced."

Hermione grinned. "We know. We've kept it quiet purposefully by just not talking about it with anyone and making sure that only one of the professors knows our status for sure."

Hannah shook her head. "You two are amazing. I'd never have guessed that you are actually married...though there was that weird bit today with your eyes going all white for a moment before you talked to me again."

"What does she mean, eyes going all white?"

"No idea. Sirius hasn't said anything and neither has Remus. If something was weird, they'd have told us."

"SEE! You were both doing it again. Both of you...your eyes went all white for a moment at the same time."

"Oh shit. I wish someone had told us that before." Harry said, somewhat panicky.

"I know." Hermione replied, sounding just as concerned. "We're going to have to figure out something to hide it."

"Later, love. Hannah, remember?"

Hermione giggled. "Really? She wants it too?"

"Go find out for yourself, love."

Hermione skipped in place for a moment in a very, very girly way – which made Harry laugh out loud. It was great, he thought, to see her so excited. Hannah, for her part, didn't know what to make of it and started giggling herself, which turned out to be infectious. Soon the three of them were laughing, even as they were moving closer together. Soon, Hermione's hands were touching Hannah; exploring her face, her hair, her back and then up again. So occupied, Hermione let herself be openly caressed by Harry – something that, for their own safety and privacy, she wouldn't have permitted if they were in public.

Eventually Hermione grew more serious about feeling up her new lover and Harry watched as Hermione's hands made their way

underneath Hannah's shirt and shorts. "Love, let's just strip her and get us all into the shower. Then we can take her to bed."

"Oh fuck, yes."

Harry smiled as his eyes regained full focus and he saw how hard Hannah's nipples had become against her shirt as Hermione's insistent fingers plumbed the depths of her core. "Her knickers are so soft, Harry!"

"Just like yours, love?" He whispered in her mind as he succeeded in pulling her yellow soccer shorts down and off before clutching her knickers-clad arse with one hand while the other slipped down her front, under the elastic waistband of her knickers, and cupped her sex.

Hermione thrilled to the feel of his hands, and her hips began undulating, first forward and then backward, showing him just how much she liked his touch. Her movements inflamed his desire for her and made his need for release even more desperate.

"Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck !" Hermione babbled as her Harry-induced orgasm ripped through her body; destroying any semblance of control that she might have had. Hannah was just a second behind and began keening in a long, erotic crescendo that ended when she all but collapsed into Harry and Hermione's arms.

It took several minutes for the two girls to recover sufficiently to be able to move, but when they did, they turned on Harry with feral looks and quick hands that made short work of his clothing. Once they reached Harry's boxers, Hermione whispered in Hannah's ear as she pushed the blonde girl down and onto her knees. "Suck him and drink his cum while I finger your sweet pussy."

Hannah was a very, very suggestible girl, as she had a strong imagination and powerful mind, so Hermione's dirty words were almost enough to make the blonde girl climax again, without even being touched. The moment Harry's manhood sprang free of his boxers, however, Hannah took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, her body beginning to quake with the tell-tale signs of another mind-wrenching orgasm. She had been told that there was a direct correlation between a wizard's 'endowment' and his power, but she hadn't believed it, because it seemed to be just another story that

young women passed around for entertainment (and fantasy) purposes. SEEING evidence of the voracity of the story was an altogether different thing. Hermione grinned as Hannah gently took the 9.5" in., 24 cm. long throbbing shaft in her hands and began to stroke it up and down.

"I'm going to cum, 'Mione"

Hermione, hearing Harry's warning in her head, used her free hand to push Hannah's head forward, so that her mouth completely engulfed the first couple of inches of her husbands' massive cock. "Don't stop stroking him. He's going to cum in a second. Drink it down. You'll love what it does to you" she said into the girl's ear.

Hannah did as told and soon his hot, sweet cum was filling her mouth. She swallowed as much as she was able, before she had to back off to breathe, so that she could start again.

Because she was also on her knees, Hermione could feel Harry's legs trembling next to her and she knew that Hannah had done much more than just a 'fair' job in satisfying him. "How was that, love?" she asked him, almost rhetorically, across their bond.

Harry pushed his love as well as his passion at her across their bond, which Hermione returned, full force, and in that moment, Hannah had the chance to see for the first time the powerful, bright-white glow that marked Harry and Hermione as not just a bonded couple, but a soul-bonded couple. She gasped, and not just because the raw magic in Harry's seed had invaded her system and was bonding with her magic.

"You didn't tell me you were soul-bonded!"

Hermione turned to stare at their new lover. "What do you mean?" she said, deliberately ignoring the girls' pronouncement. "Don't all couples glow?"

Somewhat scared to hear what the girl might have to say, Harry and Hermione looked at the girl intently. "NO! REALLY powerful couples glow and only the MOST powerful glow gold. WHITE is a color that has never been seen, at least not in the last thousand years. If I'm right, and you know my grades, Hermione...I'm usually right."

Hermione smiled at her new lover and then reached over to stroke the girl's hair in a genuine gesture of affection.

Hannah took Hermione's hand into her own and then pulled it to her lips so that she could kiss it, before continuing. "Anyway, I've put a fair bit of research into the various types of bonds and I know for certain that no one living, including Nicolas Flamel, has ever seen a couple bonded like you two."

There was no need for Hermione to try to guess at Harry's reaction to that pronouncement. Being different from everyone else – and the likelihood of being scorned for that difference – was something that truly bothered Harry. He didn't want to be different. He wanted to be 'Harry'...just another student, in love with a girl, and planning a future together with her. That it could never, ever be that way for him and for them was something that made Harry both angry and sad.

"How much do we tell her, Harry?"

"As much or as little as you think we can trust her with, love. I'll follow your lead."

Hermione felt her love for him, which ran all the way down into her magical core, as a frisson of pleasure that vibrated through her whole body as she realized how deep his trust and love for her ran, almost as if she was some kind of magical bronze bell and he was a striking hammer.

"We'll tell her everything, but not right now. Let's strip her and do all those things we're both thinking."

Harry caught Hermione's sultry smile and nodded his agreement, which gave her the go-ahead to take charge of the situation. "Stand" she said to Hannah and Hannah complied; wondering what was coming next (her, she hoped!).

"Strip off – but leave your knickers." Hermione said, as she moved to do the same thing. Harry watched the two get naked and as they did so, took in the differences. Hannah was just a scooch taller than Hermione, but she was just a little bit leaner, so she appeared somewhat smaller as a result. Her breasts were more than adequate for her build and they stood high and proud. Hermione, on the other hand, was a bit stronger built, with slightly broader shoulders,

stronger arms, and had fuller breasts. Her stomach though was incredibly flat -even more so than Hannah's - and Harry could see the outline of six-pack abs. Both girls had full, lustrous heads of hair; Hermione with her brownish-red (almost auburn) shoulder-length ringlets that smelled of vanilla and cinnamon and Hannah with golden blonde hair that was both layered and feathered back, so that it cascaded down her back.

The girls turned to stare at him, just as he had been staring at them, once they were done undressing. Harry's cock was stone-hard again and jutting out at an almost perfect 45 degree angle from his body, which Hannah privately thought should be impossible, given how much blood it probably took to power it. "Like what you see, Harry?" Hannah asked, her voice dripping with desire.

Harry knew he didn't really have to say anything, since actions spoke much louder than words. Reaching out, Harry took her breasts in his hands softly and caressed them; pinching her nipples between his thumbs and middle fingers. "You're beautiful, Hannah. Why I didn't notice years ago, I'll never know."

She laughed even as he began kissing his way up her throat and along her jaw, on his way to capturing her mouth with his. Hermione stepped up behind Harry; reaching around to grasp his erection with both hands, which caused him to moan into Hannah's mouth. Hannah could feel Hermione's hands moving against her belly as she stroked her husband's cock. "If they keep that up, I'm never going to be able to resist Harry if he wants to fuck me." She knew she had to hold out long enough to tell him about the prophecy and about the curse and give him the chance to say no. That was growing increasingly difficult as her body was rocked with the waves of desire that were coming from the combination his hands and kisses, as well as the images of all the things they could do together that were rampaging through her head.

"Shower, now..." Hermione thought to her husband, even as he approached the point of no return because of the insistent stroking of her hands up and down his wet shaft.

"Oh no you don't. I want you to cum in me while Hannah licks me."

The very thought of doing so made Harry shiver with pleasure. "You're wicked, love. I almost didn't stop."

"It won't be long. Bring her along and we'll see just how good she is."

"She's very good...very, very good!" Harry thought back to his wife lasciviously.

How they made it into the shower without raping each other was a mystery, Harry thought. Just the act of stripping the girl's knickers off them was perilously close to being more than he could take.

Hermione had never been more worked up in her life and Harry's touch as he worked the incredibly sexy, yet simple white cotton, bikini knickers down her hips and then down to the floor in a puddle seemed to push her to a new level of excitement. Hannah, on the other hand, momentarily refused to be parted from her knickers, as she used them to coax his hands to touch more and more of her. They were able, finally, to divest Hannah of them, or rather Hermione was, after several of Harry's fingers simultaneously slithered into the girls' sex and into her bottom; making her scream with orgasm yet again.

Once they were in the shower together, Hermione pushed a warm, wet, soapy flannel into their new lovers' hands and told her to get her 'good and clean' while Hermione backed onto her husbands' rampant erection; burying him deep in her clenching, wet pussy.

Pinned up against the wall of the shower, Harry couldn't move the way he wanted to, but it didn't matter, as Hermione was doing the moving for both of them; repeatedly impaling herself on his steely phallus. Their magic began to merge once again, just as it had the first time they had made love, and so it didn't take long for Harry to lose all semblance of control. Pouring his seed deep in his beloveds' body, Harry cried out his release. That pushed Hermione over the edge and she too convulsed in orgasm. Hannah wanted to say, "Me next!" but knew that she couldn't...at least until she had had an honest, face-to-face, clothed, discussion with the two of them about what she was facing and why hooking up with them could either be bad or good, depending on what happened and the choices they made together.

However, there were other things that Hannah could do and one of them included pleasuring the beautiful woman in front of her. Falling

to her knees, Hannah began her devotions at Hermione's core; praying that at some point, the favor would be returned.

It was...again and again over the course of the next several hours. In the afterglow of their torrid lovemaking, Hannah finally broke down and told her new lovers about the curse that haunted her family and her, specifically, and what she hoped that Harry would be able to do for her. Fortunately, Harry's 'saving people thing' had already kicked in, even before he was asked, and the three were able to come to an extremely satisfying resolution.

At about the same time, in a brightly lit, dry cave, somewhere in the mountains of western Scotland; Tuesday, September 19, 1995

Arthur Weasley was pacing back and forth as his youngest son stuffed his face with what little food the boy had been able to scrounge up during their several-week ordeal. Ginny watched in disgust as she saw the nervousness that was plaguing their father and her brother's callous disregard of the situation. She wondered sometimes if the prat was even related to her, so different were his behaviors and attitudes from the rest of the family. With their mother gone, it had grown increasingly difficult for their father to keep Ron in line and yet successfully guide them from safe-house to shelter to safe-house.

Ginny wondered, as she absentmindedly twirled her wand in her right hand, whether their father was going to be able to do anything at all to get Ron to shape up and actually work at being a decent, competent wizard or if Ron was going to have to be sacrificed somewhere along the line. The thought didn't trouble her as much as she thought it probably should.

After waiting for what seemed like more than an hour, the air around them suddenly began to shimmer. Ginny knew that something was about to happen, so she scrambled out of the way and to a safe spot behind a large, smoky-quartz stalagmite. She was pleased to see that her father had done the same thing and even more pleased that he hadn't bothered to drag Ron with him. The boy was oblivious to just about everything, including his own safety.

A moment later, a blue-and-white vortex appeared about four feet off the ground and a short, balding, nondescript man stepped through. He was wearing a dusty, dirty-brown traveling cloak, dark pants, an

off-white tunic, and Muggle hiking shoes. While the clothes were slightly different from the first night that they had met, the expression wasn't.

Arthur stepped from behind the stalagmite that he had used for cover and said, his wand still pointed at the man's chest, "What were you doing in New Zealand?"

The man turned and saw where Arthur was standing. Breaking into a wide smile, he replied "Making Mead and fruit wines and raising sheep". Arthur nodded before lowering his wand. "Had to make sure"

"No worries, Arthur. 'Constant vigilance' as our friend would say".

"You can come out, Ginny" Arthur said, turning in her general direction. He didn't bother even addressing Ron, as the sullen red-headed boy was sitting only eight feet away from where the two men were standing.

Ginny stepped out from where she was hiding and she walked over to where her father was standing, though her wand never left her hand. The man, whoever he was, knew that she was watching his movements and Ginny knew that he knew, which made her feel oddly pleased.

"Do you have the document?" Arthur asked; his eyes flicking back to look at his son.

"Aye, I do. All you have to do is sign."

Arthur nodded. He took from inside his cloak a long, ornately carved fountain pen, which he had enchanted to never run dry of ink. With a tap of his wand, the pen glowed for a moment. With another flick of his wand, the retired Unspeakable conjured a flat, stone writing tablet and then laid the scroll out on it, so that he could sign it.

"Two years?" Arthur asked, before he set pen to parchment.

"Aye. Two years, maybe a bit more or a bit less."

Arthur shook his head, figuring that either way, there wasn't much he could do about it. The modified fountain pen acted just like a

blood-quill; digging into the back of his hand and making him wince in pain as he signed his name.

"Episkey" the shorter man said; instantly healing the cut on his friends' hand.

"Thank you. I was never very good with that, even with all the times that we had to use it."

The other man chuckled a mirthless laugh. "Some things never change, Arthur."

"You'll be alright with him?"

"Or I'll know the reason why" the man replied, now openly looking at Ron.

"Do what you must, just as I will."

"You'll owe me for this, Arthur."

"That I will. I'm sorry it came to this."

"Not your fault I think, Arthur. T'was Albus' doing...and Molly's, God rest her soul."

Arthur knew that was true, but it stung none-the-less. The sadness in his eyes was apparent, even to Ginny, and she moved to hug her father. "What's happening, father?" she asked, though she feared the answer.

Ron was playing with a couple of stones in the dirt and not paying much attention to what was going on between his father and the stranger, so didn't see the man remove his ring and suddenly grew by almost a foot. Ginny sucked in a breath and started to lift her wand when her father reached over and gently pushed it down. "It's alright" he whispered to her. "It was just a glamor that my friend wears."

"What's going to happen to Ron?" she asked; looking up at her father.

"No longer our concern. Now say your goodbyes. It's time for us to go."

Ginny was confused. "Say goodbye to your brother" Arthur repeated. "You're not going to see him again for a while."

Ginny looked at her brother, sitting and playing in the dirt, oblivious to what was going on and not even listening to what was being said around him because of the make-shift chess board that he had set up in the dirt with the stones he had gathered. Shaking her head, she said, "No, I'm good."

Rather than fight it, Arthur nodded and said, "Let's go". Ginny instinctively held onto her father and then felt herself whisked away by the magic of the portkey that he must have activated.

Ron was a hard one to shake out of his reverie, but a sharp boot to his upper thigh was sufficient to get him to pay attention. He clutched his leg in sudden pain, exclaiming, "What the fuck was that for?" before he looked up and realized that he was alone in the cave with a very tall, red-headed man whom he had never seen before. It was enough to make him reach for his wand; a move that the tall man intercepted with a smack to the boy's head.

"Listen here, laddie. You're mine now. Your father was unimpressed with you – enough so that he sold you to me for the next two years. I told him, foolishly, that I could probably make a decent wizard out of you. I have my serious doubts about it, but for Arthur's sake, I'm willing to make the effort. Now, this is the only explanation that you're going to get. From here on out, you will call me Master. Do you understand?"

Ron looked at him, not understanding what was being told and feeling petulant about the fact that he hadn't eaten enough. He started to stand; his wand-hand coming up to grab his wand. He never made it. The tall man slapped his hand away and then used the same hand to smash him across the face. "You're going to learn, boy, that such insolence has a cost. Do it again and you will spend a week as a cockroach. After that, we'll work on even smaller forms. Am I clear?"

"Fuck you, asshole"

Wham!

The man's second hit dropped Ron onto his back like a sack of potatoes. Walking over, Robert grabbed Ron by his shirt and dragged him to his feet. "You're a very slow learner, Weasley. You might not even make a week in my service. Your father will be disappointed that I had to dispose of you so quickly."

"Di...di...dispose?" Ron said, the color draining visibly from his face.

"Yup. Apparently you weren't listening earlier. Your life is mine for the next two years. If I have to kill you, the contract your father signed gives me that right. Now, you are going to learn and you are going work harder than you ever have before or you will suffer. Are we clear?"

"Yes" Ron said, afraid of what might come next.

"Yes what?"

"Yes, Master"

"Good, you can be taught. You will call me Master in all circumstances, unless I tell you otherwise, which I won't. You will eat what I tell you, sleep when I tell you, work when I tell you and will do nothing but those things. If I see you doing magic at any other time, you will be punished. If you reach for your wand and I haven't given you leave to do so, you will be punished. Clear?"

Ron hung his head and then said, "Yes, Master."

A stinging hex hit Ron full-on in the chest, causing him to grunt in pain and in surprise. "Look up! Look me in the eye! You are a wizard, not a slug. If you're not proud of yourself, no one else will be!"

Ron stared at him in surprise. No one had ever spoken to him this way before. His father had tried to encourage him and at times, even guide him in his own way, but this man was saying something that Ron had never heard before.

"What do you have to say for yourself?"

Unsure of how he should respond, Ron looked at him and said, "I understand, Master."

Robert looked at him; appraising him fully before he said, "No, I don't think you do, at least not yet. But there's a hope that just maybe, you will. We will see. Now come. We've a ways to go before we sleep tonight and I'm in no mood to sleep in the woods again."

Ron looked around and then started to say something, before catching himself. Robert was starting to walk towards one end of the cave and Ron had to hustle to catch up with him. He had no idea where they were going or why, but he decided that doing what he was told, at least for a while, was better than being killed outright. Life had changed for him suddenly and though it wasn't the change he was hoping for, it was better than being hungry all the time and moving from place to place, trying to avoid drawing attention, either Muggle or magical.

As the two made their way towards the entrance of the cave, Ron wondered where his father and sister were and why they had left without saying goodbye. He felt the beginnings of tears as he thought about his only sister and the games they had played over the years. Walking into the twilight, Ron prayed that he would live to see her again and tell her that he really did love her.

January 30, 2010

I know, I know. I lied. I said I was going to go and work on VC: Rebirth and yes, I am doing so. However, this chapter wrote itself in about four days and I wanted to get it out sooner than later. As usual, I would ask you to PLEASE leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter eleven – "Gatherings"

By the_scribbler

the_scribbler (at) shadowgard (d*t) com

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER (eventually) SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

Note Two: This chapter has considerable smutty content. If that doesn't work for you, skip this chapter. You'll be missing important stuff, but that's your own lookout.

Note Three: This chapter is 14,613 words and 30 pages long. I write in Palatino 12 pt. for text and Calligraph421 BT 16 pt. for headers.

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From Chapter Ten – "Complications"

Ron looked around and then started to say something, before catching himself. Robert was starting to walk towards one end of the cave and Ron had to hustle to catch up with him. He had no idea where they were going or why, but he decided that doing what he was told, at least for a while, was better than being killed outright. Life had changed for him suddenly and though it wasn't the change he was hoping for, it was better than being hungry all the time and moving from place to place, trying to avoid drawing attention, either Muggle or magical.

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Early in the morning, Saturday, September 23, 1995 – at the Bluebelle Inn, North Ballachulish, Scotland, on the western shore of Loch Linnhe

Ginny Weasley awoke to the sounds of birds singing all around the Inn where they were staying, near the shore of Loch Linnhe. She was not a happy girl. Bone-tired, though she had slept for more than ten hours on a gloriously soft feather bed, she prayed for a couple more hours of sleep, and a huge breakfast when she finally rose for the day. It was hard to sleep though, as she was without her wand, in a strange (though incredibly comfortable) bed, and was 'on the lamb'. Her father had taken it from her, to prevent her from doing magic, either accidentally or intentionally and he had "strongly admonished" her, which she had taken as yelling, for getting shirty with him over it.

Arthur, for his part, had slept the sleep of the dead in the next room over – after inscribing blood runes on each of their doors the night before. They were the most offensive kind, too – designed to kill in the first instance, rather than just wound - in order to protect the two of them and give them enough time to get away, if Riddle's forces caught up with them.

It was their last night on 'their side' of the pond, though Ginny didn't yet know it. The previous day, Arthur had managed to obtain passage for the both of them on a deep-sea trawler that was headed west – far, far off-shore. There they would meet up with another trawler – this time an American one – that would allow them to complete their journey. Arthur would, as quietly as possible, exchange the finest diamonds he had yet created with the first boat's captain; reserving the pure, gold galleons (the last ones that he had to his name) for the American captain.

The entire trip, Arthur had been told, would take ten days. However, he didn't plan on being on the American boat that long. Once they cleared the wards and were met by the American aurors (from the Federal Bureau of Magical Law Enforcement – call the 'BMLE' for short), he intended to apparate the two of them to the eastern-most point in Maine. From there, they would make one or more hops in order to get to Harry and Hermione.

Minerva had finally replied, via Patronus, to his first message; assuring him that she had, indeed, received his incredible message and had acted on it. More, she had told him that many things were happening and the sooner he could arrive, the better – which became his secondary impetus for their unusual means of departure. The first, however, were the Death-eater (and wanna-be Death-eater) 'snatch' teams which had sprung up around the country in a vain attempt to catch him and his children. The 'message' that he had sent to Riddle had infuriated the dark lord; making him disperse his limited forces throughout the Kingdom.

A separate Patronus message from Kingsley Shacklebolt had assured him that the Queen's forces were well aware of the threat that Riddle's forces posed and that they had begun whittling them down considerably to a more manageable size. Kingsley's message had also urged him to 'stay safe' and not attract undue attention and that he should let both Bill and Charlie know that they should take extra precautions in and around their worksites to avoid being recognized.

For Charlie, it simply meant that he would avoid leaving the dragon refuge until the trouble was either over completely or had been contained to the point where his life was no longer in constant jeopardy. For Bill, it meant asking for a transfer to the Americas, where he could more easily blend in with the local (non-magical)

population and work along side of the curse-breakers in Central- and South America.

A few hours after dawn, Arthur finally roused himself from beneath the golden, heavy down comforter sufficiently to begin packing what few belongings he had removed from their house, back into the small (bottomless) backpack that he carried. The rest of the house had been packed up and put in very secure storage at Gringotts-Paris. Privately, Arthur knew that he wouldn't be needing anything from their home because he wouldn't see out the war. Losing his wife was too much; too great a burden to survive. His oath – promising to take Riddle's life – would also be enforced, one way or the other. It was not something he shared with Ginny. She didn't need to know.

As he leaned against the window of his room and looked out over the peaceful waters of Lock Linnhe, the tears began to fall...and for once, he didn't try to stop them. The tears carried some of the pain away – at least for a little while. There was no shame in crying, he knew. Even in the Muggle world, he had learned, the pain of losing one's spouse was known as the worst kind.

How long he cried, he didn't know, but soon enough, he heard his daughter's knock on his door and he used the rough fabric of his sweater to dry his eyes.

Opening the door, he saw his daughter's face; fresh-scrubbed from her ablutions and a wave of sadness and pain threatened once again to overtake him. It was all that he could do to pull his emotions back under control as he smelled her perfume and saw her bright, beautiful, hazel eyes.

Reading the faces of her family had always been something that Ginny excelled at – and her father's face, for one brief moment, told her a great deal and none of it was good.

"Ready to go?" he asked her softly.

"More or less. Need to eat first, though."

Arthur nodded. Their rooms came with breakfast included each day and over the five days that they had been at the Inn, she had come to look forward to it. The Inn catered mostly to American tourists, as

well as a few Irish, French, German, Norwegians, and Danes. Mostly though, it was the Americans and they ate prodigiously at breakfast. Like Ron, Ginny thought sadly. She missed her brother after a fashion and wondered where he was and what he was doing. She had no way of contacting him (other than by Patronus messenger, which Harry had shown her how to do), since her father had taken away her wand. "Just until we're safely out of the country" he had told her, when she complained of its loss for the third time.

Once they had eaten their fill and her father had grabbed several extra rolls to take with them, along with a couple of apples, they made their way to the foyer, where Arthur queued up to pay their bill and thank the Innkeeper and his wife.

Once the bill was paid, Arthur once again hoisted his bag onto his right shoulder; adjusted his wand so that it was instantly accessible from the hidden wand-holster that he always wore, and put his arm about his only daughters' shoulder. "Let's be off" he said quietly.

The fishing vessel that would take them safely out of UK waters and beyond the magical nets which ringed the island lay at anchor a quarter-mile out into the harbor. It had pushed back from its berth before high-tide ebbed and waited for them to arrive via dingy.

At first, Ginny had trepidations about stepping into the small boat, but once she saw her father do it, she couldn't not do it. Seating herself next to her father, she looked about and realized that she was leaving England for the very first time. She had no idea where they were going, or how they would get there. Those were secrets that her father had deliberately kept from her, so that she could divulge nothing if caught. Ginny didn't know Occlumency, though she was aware that it existed as a discipline because of her studies at Hogwarts, and so she wisely didn't push him to tell her things that others, trained in Legilimency, could pick out of her thoughts.

Looking around the harbor, Ginny was smart enough to figure out that they were headed for a boat. Which one, she wasn't quite sure, but there were several very large vessels moored at anchor and so she sat back and let the rocking motion of the waves calm her nerves.

Ten minutes later, Ginny realized to which boat they were headed. It was a huge fishing vessel; complete with nets, crab-pots, ropes, and

other, weird (in her estimation) contraptions. The name on the side of the ship was no name at all, but rather the letters, GW 011AT. If she had been able to see the back of the boat, she would have seen the name "Glasgow Queen" painted in bright, white letters against a Persian Blue background. The ship, a deep-water, "wet fish" large trawler (meaning it stored its catch live, wet, and cold in deep holds at the center of the ship), bore Saint Andrew's Cross, the flag of Scotland, as well as the Union Jack. Once they were along side the boat, Ginny realized just how big it was. It was almost half-again as long as the Quidditch pitch at Hogwarts and from the water's surface, almost three stories high.

Someone above them tossed a rope ladder over the side, which clanged and clattered against the side of the ship, and Ginny was told to grab a hold and climb up. Once she was over the railing above and safe, Arthur did the same, though more nimbly than Ginny would have ever given him credit for being able to do.

After introductions were made, a call was made up to bridge and soon enough, a burly-looking man in a flannel shirt and jeans met them in a small aft cabin.

Arthur put his hand out and shook the captain's hand and then introduced him to Ginny.

"Thank you for being willing to do this, captain", Arthur said quietly.

The captain nodded. "You have it?"

Arthur reached into his pocket and pulled out a small, black-velvet bag that he had gotten from the last Muggle jeweler with whom he had traded. "Right here".

"Show me" the captain said, a little roughly; his voice abraded by years of smoking a pipe.

Used to dealing with people of all sorts, Arthur wasn't put off by the man's tone and simply loosened the strings on the bag and poured the contents into the man's open hand.

Ten, brilliant-white, perfectly cut, internally flawless, 2 ct. diamonds fell into the man's waiting palm and in the morning sunlight that was

streaming through the doorway, the diamonds lit up the cabin as if on fire themselves.

Swallowing hard, the captain said, "Bloody hell, mate"

Arthur grinned. "We have a deal?"

"Aye, we have a deal. These will be for the misses', they will."

"Don't sell them all at once or show them to anyone else as a group. One at a time, and never all to the same person. You'll get better quid that way."

That made the captain raise one gimlet eye at Arthur. "Do I want to know how you came to have these, mate?"

Shaking his head, Arthur made it very clear that the answer to that was no.

"These better not be stolen" the man said, gruffly.

"They're not, but if you want the whole answer, we have to get out beyond two hundred miles. Then I can tell you everything." 'Whether you believe me or not', Arthur thought to himself.

"Deal."

"Good. Let's get going. The sooner we're underway, the happier I'll be."

"We'll be beyond the two hundred mile limit by tomorrow night. I'll hold you to your promise."

Arthur smiled. For the first time, he actually looked forward to breaking the International Statute of Secrecy and to the stiff drink that he was certain they would share when he did so.

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21 Rue Jacques Ferron, at the corner of Rue des Terrasses de Fleuve, overlooking Rivière St. Laurent – Sunday, September 30, 1995

It was a good thing, Harry thought, that they (he and Sirius) had made the effort to buy up the three other houses in the area, because it afforded them a great deal more privacy than they would have ever had otherwise. The 'in-town' townhouse had been nice to have during the summer, and it certainly had put them a lot closer to the restaurants and shops that they both enjoyed, but it didn't have either the view or the privacy....or the extra security. Nor, he thought, did it have the fabulous river-walk that this home enjoyed. The down-side was that the river could flood them right out and it would be next to impossible to use magic to keep the river back, without shattering the statute of secrecy all to hell. However, it was hugely unlikely that anything like that was going to happen while there were living there. All they had to do was to hunker down for a year or a year and a half and get through their schooling, before they were ready to return to England and finally do what had to be done.

It was something that Harry had tried, the best that he was able, to not think about. The adults around him, Hermione, and now Hannah, had done their best to assure the three teenagers that they would oversee things the best that they could while the three of them focused on their schooling. So much so, in fact, that Sirius and Remus had all but commanded that Harry put the entire Riddle/Dumbledore/British magical society problem aside and focus exclusively on their schoolwork and personal training.

Harry really didn't have a problem with their 'command', excepting for the fact that he did feel a certain amount of guilt in being so far removed from the problem. Hermione tried to assure him that his money had done a great deal of good and had saved many, many lives already. Minerva McGonagall had even gone so far as to sit him down and show him, via the priceless "Book of Names" how many 11-year old witches and wizards (and by extension, the families of those witches and wizards) had been saved because they (the adults) had organized rescue missions to England, using Muggle aircraft for the trips over. When Harry asked about the 'return' trips, Minerva forcefully told him that portkeys were being created on the American side of the pond, so that their creation wouldn't be picked up in England. Hermione and Harry learned that when all was said and done, the UK would be poorer by fifty-three magical children, along with their accompanying families – which translated into 237 more people safe from Riddles' atrocities.

One area of Harry's life had yet to be sorted though and that was his DADA class. Isabelle Gatineau, the woman he had dueled and almost killed, was now treating him with kid-gloves in class and hardly ever even speaking to him. This lessened the effectiveness of her teaching almost to the point of ridiculousness and it left him, Hermione, and Hannah extremely frustrated. Harry knew that if it weren't for Sirius, Remus, Bethany, and Minerva, they'd not have learned much of anything since the start of classes at the beginning of the month.

Walking down the gravel path that stretched for miles along the northern side of the river, Harry and Hermione walked along in what anyone else would have perceived as perfect silence. That was, in fact, the farthest thing from the truth. Mind-speech or whatever it was called, allowed Harry and Hermione to converse at a rate that would have dumbfounded anyone else. Ideas, images, feelings, and words flowed between their joined minds at an astounding rate. So much was shared, and at such speed, that it actually allowed them more time to formulate ideas and to consider what the other had said.

They didn't notice, because they didn't need to, where their feet were actually falling, and sometimes they found that they had walked much further than they had intended to. This was one of those days. By the time that they had decided on what to do about their DADA class, they had already covered more than five miles.

Because the sun was already setting, the two settled into the others' arms and the disappeared home without the slightest noise. They were a rumor of a myth; a shadow dissolved into the coming inkiness of night.

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Very early in the morning at Manor Delacour, Forêt de Meudon, just east of Le Route des Bois Plantes; Meudon, France; Monday, October 1st, 1995

Fleur moaned with frustration as well as burning desire, as her fingers made their way down, across her fabulously flat, toned belly, into her lace knickers, and down into her wet sexagain.....for the sixth time in as many hours. One face; one voice, one man...was slowly driving her mad with his absence. Harry Potter.

She was an almost 18 year-old virginal Veela, whose sexual maturity had come upon her late and suddenly, much like a freight-train and she was suffering its unrelenting effects. The lifelike toy, which her 37 yr. old maternal aunt (who was a very sexy, pure-blood Veela) had surreptitiously given her (laughing her bright, sparkling laugh while playfully teasing her favorite niece who had finally become a 'proper' woman), moved with small motions in and out of her arse, in a maddening counter-point rhythm. She squeezed down around it, hoping that it would trigger the orgasm that her body so desperately wanted.

She had accepted, intellectually, that she owed a life-debt to Harry, but she hadn't realized all of the ramifications of that debt until several nights before. Now she knew that she had not only accepted her debt to him, but that her magic had accepted him too, and that her body must follow. It was going to be a difficult conversation to have with her parents, though she knew that they would, in the end, accede to her situation and find a means by which to transport her to wherever Harry had taken refuge. Her sisters' situation was somewhat uncertain, though Gabrielle had repeatedly insisted that she, too, owed a life-debt to Harry.

Fleur wondered about that and hoped against hope that it wasn't true. A 13 year-old Veela was completely unprepared to deal with the storm of emotions and desires that came with a quickening (which was what a forced, sudden sexual maturation for a Veela girl was called). She hoped that Gabrielle was simply deluded about the situation in which she had found herself during the awful, second task of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and that Harry hadn't, in fact, saved her life. Unfortunately, she had already been extracted from the water by the time Gabrielle broke the surface of the water and was pulled free and so hadn't ever gotten a truthful telling of the events leading up to that moment.

Only one person, Harry himself, knew what had happened that morning, and Fleur had never had a chance to pigeonhole him over it. In retrospect, it was a major problem, because now she couldn't convince her baby sister that Harry hadn't saved her life. As she lay back, there was nothing she could do but finish what her dreams had started – even though her sex was now extremely tender to the touch and much abused by the long nights of self-pleasuring. She hoped that Harry could once and for all time relieve her of the sexual

ache that plagued her and give her back at least some semblance of control over her now rampant desires.

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In the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Monday, October 2, 1995 – just after dawn.

"Report" Riddle hissed menacingly; looking down at the nameless Death-eater who had been tasked with bringing the dark lord his breakfast.

The man cowered on the floor in front of the makeshift throne. "There is nothing, my lord. There has been no word from any of the teams that were dispatched to find the blood-traitors. It is as if they simply disappeared. There hasn't been a single instance of resistance to your rule anywhere in the country, my lord...but the owls we have sent out to communicate your orders have come back with their messages undelivered. That happens only when the subject is dead or behind the strongest of wards. Since no such wards exist in the Kingdom right now, other than those on this castle, we have to assume that they, too, have been killed or otherwise removed from the country."

Riddle thought about what the man said for several long minutes, even as the man continued to cower on the cold, stone floor. There was no point in punishing the man, as he hadn't done anything to incur his lords' wrath, and it was stupid in the extreme to waste the lives of willing servants. By-passing the issue of the men's sudden and unexplained disappearances, Riddle pressed on. "What about our food situation? What has been done to address our need for supplies?"

The man quavered and then took from an inner pocket of his tattered robes several folded pieces of parchment. These he handed up to his lord and master, without making direct eye contact. Opening the several loose pages, the dark lord took in the information that was being presented; his face an unreadable mask. After a couple of long minutes he said, "Rise and return to your duties. You have served me well, even if others have not. If you complete the tasks today that I am contemplating, I will find a suitable reward for your efforts. Dismissed."

"Yes my lord! Thank you, my lord!" Bowing once again, the man turned and hurried away; pleased to have lived another day and amazed that he had not once been punished for others' failures.

For his part, Tom Riddle was a man with many difficulties – not the least of which was what to do about the growing need for fresh food supplies. Manpower was the other challenge and one that he had hoped that Lucius Malfoy would have solved.

However, not everything goes according to plan. Even as the dark lord contemplated his problems, he knew that the elder Malfoy's head was rotting on the top of a tall spike outside the main entrance to Gringotts-Paris.

Riddle had been unable to protect his servant from their wrath, which was a powerful warning to all who saw it, that the Goblins do not take kindly to those who would try to slay their leadership. What was worse was that the bodies of those who had assisted Lucius in his failed assault were rotting as well. Each had been gruesomely impaled, using the traditional method (arse-first) on a long, wooden, 4" wide (sharpened) spike, while very much alive, outside the main entrance to the caves that they had tried to attack. For the Goblins, each dead body was a sign of strength and of victory and the warning had been taken to heart by Riddle's remaining forces. "Leave the Goblins alone" was the message that was clear as day to each and every one of them.

Riddle knew that unless he personally led forces against the Goblins, they were beyond the reach of his anger. Clear as well was the reality that they needed to find a way to fund their efforts and to 'win back' the trust of those who had fled the country. It was impossible to achieve his wider goal – the complete domination of all of Europe – if he didn't have the manpower and he couldn't gather sufficient manpower if he was unable to pay. It was an infuriating reality and one that could be laid squarely at the feet of Harry Potter. Riddle ground his teeth in frustration.

There were so many things that the Potter brat had done to stifle, stymie, or otherwise thwart his efforts! Turning his attention to his food for a moment, the dark lord considered what might be done to strike at the brat directly. Wherever he was, it was clear that he was very well protected. Messenger owls were unable to find him and the three followers that he had who knew the boy personally or by sight

had been unable to apparate to the boy. That meant he was either beyond their range or behind wards strong enough to turn away apparition magic. Either way, it was a vexing problem.

Taking several bites of his breakfast, the dark lord was just about to finish his tea when Bellatrix Lestrange entered the Great Hall. Her jet black hair cascaded down her back in velvety ringlets and her eyes were alight with pleasure and fire. She was dressed in long, form-fitting, black Acromantula silk robes – which she had taken to wearing since her liberation from Azkaban prison – and the dark lord could see that her nipples were hard points under the silk.

Her gait was still somewhat unsteady though, as the restorative potions which Riddle had given her in the days after her release had been unable to completely heal her. More than a decade of confinement in that, cold, dank, miserable hell-hole had permanently hobbled her and no amount of magic, save for that of the Philosophers' stone itself, could restore her.

It was the one thing that detracted from an otherwise amazing image. She approached the dark lord's throne and fell to her knees. "My lord" she said softly.

Riddle smiled – something that was exceedingly difficult for him, given his altered countenance – and said, "Rise, my beloved servant." She did so and Riddle met her gaze. It was an act of trust on her part, as she knew that he could (and would) use the eye contact as an opportunity to read her thoughts.

Rather than fight it, she did everything she could to welcome him into her mind; guiding him to the thoughts she wished him to see. What he saw there displeased him greatly, even if it didn't draw his anger towards her.

"When did this happen?" Riddle hissed; his anger palpable.

"Last night, my lord, after all had gone to sleep. He tried to slip out through a window on his broom. He was caught by the Wyvern."

"And?" Riddle let the question hang. He knew what the answer was to his unvoiced question already, but wanted to see how she framed the answer aloud.

"I questioned him, my lord. He didn't take well to it. I had to be persuasive, my lord." What Bellatrix Lestrange meant by 'persuasive' was that she had tied Draco Malfoy, naked, to a very large X-platform, so that his arms and legs were outstretched and he was forced to lean forward to relieve the pressure on his joints.

What she didn't say, though her meaning was clearly understood, was that she had then proceeded to sodomize and otherwise sexually torture (read 'filleted his genitalia') Draco for several hours while questioning him. It was her favorite means of questioning/torturing people...though she preferred to 'question' teenage boys in order to satisfy her twisted, base needs.

Riddle looked at her, not disapprovingly, and said "You haven't forgotten the old ways, have you my dear?"

She laughed – a mirthless, cackling laugh – and then said "No, my lord, but I find that practice brings back some of my more rusty skills." Her tone of voice was just edgy enough, colored as it was with a tinge of sick merriment, that Riddle laughed aloud himself as he considered her words. He thought about all of the people upon whom he wished Bella could 'practice' and realized that the list was quite long.

"Bella, kill him. Feed him to the Wyvern bit at a time. Make sure he stays alive long enough to contemplate my anger."

At this suggestion, the sadistic, insane woman smiled and then bowed. "I live to serve you my love. My lord."

"It's always been you, love" he said to her, more softly than she could have ever imagined would be possible with him. "Go. Serve me. Work my will."

She bowed again and then went off to finish the work she had begun the night before. As he watched her leave through the open, great doors, Riddle could have sworn that she was skipping.

In a distant part of the Castle, three unmarked Death-eaters, including the young man who had appeared before his lord less than an hour earlier, knelt together and considered the failed escape-attempt of the youngest Malfoy. They wondered quietly amongst themselves whether they had any hope of getting away from the

madman who sat on his throne in the Great Hall. Each knew that if more forces didn't join them soon, bearing loads of fresh food, that they would begin to starve. Since taking over the castle, every effort had been put towards providing their lord sufficient food and drink, while making it look like there was enough to support the dark lords' forces. It had worked so far, but the three knew that if something wasn't done soon; their deaths would be a foregone conclusion. It would be sooner – much, much sooner, if the dark lord discovered that the 'report' he had been given less than an hour earlier was almost completely false. They either had to get more help – more young men and women willing to sacrifice themselves to the dark lord's cause (though they didn't think about it those terms) or the three of them had to get away. It was going to be one or the other and that was all there was to it.

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On the southern slope of Beinn Dearg Beag, above 6 thousand feet, Northern Scotland – early afternoon, October 3, 1995

Ron Weasley was cold. Miserably, almost intolerably cold. His stomach and feet ached from days and days of abuse and ill-treatment and his hands were chapped, red and cracking from the days of climbing in the unrelenting winds. He kept his mouth shut though and pressed on, behind his new master. He'd been beaten often enough over the last three weeks that he was unwilling to press his luck by saying something stupid or untoward. His wand was safely stashed away up his sleeve and he could, if he had to (if his survival depended on it) apparate away, he had no idea where to go or what he might do once he had done so. His parents' home was gone and his mother was dead; another of Riddle's victims. Worse, he had been left behind by his father. Not just left behind, but sold into indentured servitude – slavery by any other name – by his father. It rankled him and made him wish, at least in passing, that any other family had been his. However, there were still the warm thoughts about his sister, whom he loved and who, apparently, loved him. It was, in fact, the fact that she had made an effort to send her Patronus to him on three separate occasions which kept him going at all. For whatever else happened, he still had her love. That was something.

"Keep up, boy. We've got to reach the base-camp before nightfall. At this rate, we'll both freeze and I don't fancy dying up here for your sorry ass."

"Coming, master", Ron replied. It was all he could say. Anything more might earn him a good cuffing, and those were painful. Not as bad as the first day, but painful none-the-less.

After what seemed like hours, a cabin appeared over a rise, some hundred feet distant. It was not a rustic, 'we're-still-going-to-be-cold' cabin, but a genuine shelter, complete with a chimney puffing out inviting wood-smoke and what smelled like warm, real food. Ron's stomach rolled several times in contemplation of it.

"Master?"

"Yes?" the tall, fierce man answered.

"Where are we, master? I mean, are we still in Scotland?"

Robert huffed and then said, "Yes, we're still in Scotland. We're on the southern slope of Corrag Bhuidhe, north and east of Hogwarts."

Ron nodded. He knew that he had gotten more out of the man than he would have otherwise and figured that it was probably because the man was tired as well and his guard was down.

Forcing his voice into a polite, respectful tone, Ron said "Thank you, master."

"You're welcome" the man said quietly, "now get inside."

Ron quickly crossed the remaining distance to the cabin. However, he didn't just open the door and go inside. Sensing that this was another test, Ron drew his wand and carefully knocked twice on the door.

When no one answered, Ron turned to look at his master. "Very good. You're learning. What do you do now?"

"Detection spells, master?"

Robert the Fierce nodded. "Very good. Which ones?"

Ron thought about that for a moment. Although his feet were numb and his fingers were chaffing, he considered what ought to be done. Finally he said, "Hominum reveleo and "Animus reveleo".

Robert nodded. "Good. See? You're learning. What others?"

"Finite incantatum, Alohamora, and then Tempus subsisto."

Robert arched one eyebrow and thought about what his 'unwilling protégé' had suggested. It wasn't a bad combination, as he considered it. The last one, Tempus subsisto, stopped time completely within a fixed area, allowing for a much more thorough assessment of what dangers lay inside the area. The stronger the caster, the larger the area affected. It would be a good one to use if you were considering entering an unknown situation and wanted to eliminate any change of surprise. Ron wasn't yet at the point where his casting would last very long – that would come only with determined practice - but the fact that he had mentioned it meant that the young redhead was finally beginning to use his brain for something other than Quidditch, Chess, or wanking.

Finally, he smiled and said, "Very good. Clever. Now, knock three times on the door; stop, and then do it again. That cancels out the ensorcellment. Then you can go in."

Ron looked at his master, nodded, and then turned and did as instructed. He was beyond grateful that the door opened of its own volition and let him step inside. Robert wasn't but two steps behind him.

Once they were inside, Robert pointed out where he wanted their bags placed. "Once you've done that, you can build a fire and start making some dinner for us. You'll find food to prepare in the keep-cold chest and there should be sufficient plates and things for us to use. That is, once you've taken off your jacket and seen to the care of your feet. I can tell from here that you've some pretty nasty blisters. Your father might have sold me your contract, but he didn't want me to abuse you for its own sake."

Ron looked the man in the eye, as he had been taught to do, and said, "Thank you, Master."

"You're welcome. Now go. Do. I'm hungry as well."

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4:55 pm, October 3rd, 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec.

School was out for the day (last class dismissed at 2:55 pm), practice was over, and Hannah Abbott, soon to be Mistress Hanna Abbott-Potter, lay back on the king-sized bed that was the marital bed of Harry and Hermione Potter. Dinner had not been called yet – something wouldn't happen for another hour or more – and she had time to be by herself.

Her eyes were closed as she lay stretched out, though she was very much awake, as she slowly pleased herself. It was a glorious feeling and she reveled in it. Unlike some girls whom she had known at Hogwarts, Hannah loved touching herself and took every opportunity to do so. It didn't hurt that she had a wonderfully responsive body and that she was easily turned on. Harry had been right. She was a very suggestible girl and she thrilled to the sounds of Harry and Hermione's voices as they described all of the things that they wanted (and would) do to her body. They had wicked imaginations for such a young couple!

Harry had told her, in no uncertain terms during the second night the three of them had 'been together', that Hannah should see to it that her knickers were 'touchable'. What he meant by that was that she should wear only what not only looked best, but also was softest or silkiest to the touch. Hermione clued her in that Harry had a 'thing' for sexy, white cotton knickers and that she should take care to wear only the best, so that no matter when his hands were upon her, they would find something sexy next to her skin. Nothing made her wetter than their hands running up and down her naked (or knickers-clad) body and they knew it.

As her fingers played in her sex, exploring and caressing, her mind wandered around the memories of their play the night before. Pushing two fingers deep into her sex, she thought about how she and Hermione had 'tortured' Harry the previous night by sensuously stroking his massive erection with their hands and mouths as he lay back on the bed. She smiled to herself as she remembered how

they repeatedly brought him to the brink of climax and how, after he could take it no longer, he had rolled Hermione onto her back and fucked her until she screamed in repeated orgasm. She almost came as she thought about how Harry, unwilling to leave her unsatisfied, had pushed her onto her stomach, put a pillow under her hips, and invaded her tight, willing arse until they both came hard.

Normally, the memories of their last encounter would have been way more than enough to push Hannah over the brink of orgasm, but she was deliberately holding off, as she had been told that they would be home soon and that they would 'take care of her'. She savored that idea and longed for the day that Harry and Hermione would, together, take her as their mistress forever. Harry had told her, on their very first night together, that it would happen on a 'special' day and that it would happen before the school-year was out.

Hannah had been overjoyed to know that the curses that had been directed against her and her family would be forever nullified by Harry's willingness to allow her to completely commit to him as his life-long mistress and she knew that Harry would find a way to see to it that the curse against her family wasn't just nullified, but actually destroyed, so that it failed to prevent the Abbott family line from continuing. Hermione fully supported Harry in this and for that, Hannah truly loved her. It was good to be a Potter!

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Later that evening.....

Sirius Black and Remus Lupin looked to their duties in regards to Harry and Hermione with as much commitment as they had ever done anything and it was because of that dedication that they sat together in quiet conversation in front of the fireplace; each holding a copy of the missive that had been sent to Harry by Jean-Sebastian and Aimee Delacour, parents of Fleur and Gabrielle Delacour.

They had both read it over once each, but were examining it again to make sure that no nuances of the letter had been missed. The wording was fairly straightforward, but you never knew whether there were deeper layers of meaning when you were dealing with a professional businessman/diplomat.

October 2, 1995

Dear Lord Black,

I write to you on behalf of my daughters, Fleur Isabelle and Gabrielle Annette, who find themselves in a difficult position as it regards your adoptive charge, Harold James, Lord Potter. The matter I wish to discuss is of a delicate and private nature and I hope that you will keep this missive within your confidence.

It seems that in November, 1994, while my elder daughter was participating in the second event of the Tri-Wizard Tournament, she fell prey to a number of Grindylows and had to be rescued. Your charge was the one who came to her aid and saved her life. If Fleur's description is to be believed, the awful creatures were able to disarm her, which caused her to panic and lose the focus necessary to maintain the bubble-head charm that she had cast in order to attempt the challenge. At that moment, she began to panic and drown, as Veela are very discomposed by water. Lord Potter attacked the Grindylows, drove them off, retrieved Fleur's wand, and then got her to the surface safely. Because of his heroism, I have a living, loving daughter, instead of memories. My gratitude for that defies description. However, by rescuing Fleur, without thought of compensation, or benefit to himself, your charge bound her in the most fundamental, irrevocable way possible. My daughter's magic accepted him and mated her to him as surely as any blood ritual, and now that bond must be completed in order for her to live.

As for my younger daughter, Gabrielle, the story is much the same, but the rescue was somewhat different. As she tells it, Gabrielle was not Harry's to rescue from the bottom of the loch and yet he did so, because her sister was unable to do so. Your charge, without hesitation, risked his own life by attempting to carry to the surface his own charge, the young Ronald Weasley, as well as Gabrielle. Gabrielle claims that by being rescued in such fashion, her magic is similarly bound to Lord Potter. Because I can neither prove nor disprove her claim, I must ask you to make a difficult decision so that my daughters' safety is once again assured. I beg you to let me bring them to you, so that they can be put before Lord Potter; that their magical bonds to him might be settled.

Your humble servant,

Jean-Sebastian Delacour

"What do you think? Show it to Minnie?" Sirius said thoughtfully, as he carefully folded his copy of the letter and put it down next to his brandy.

Remus looked at his life-long friend, before folding his copy similarly and placing it next to his stack of papers. "Think so. I'd say show it to Septima and Bethany as well. They've got a good sense for things. It can't hurt and I wouldn't mind having a few more pairs of eyes on it, just so that we have a solid idea about how Hermione's going to react to all of this."

"Somehow, I don't think that's going to be a problem" Sirius said, smiling. "I didn't tell you, though I suspect you've probably already parsed it out, that Hannah, Harry, and Hermione have something serious going on between the three of them. The only question is what to do about Gabrielle. She's still too young for Harry to have anything to do with her and I don't think that he'd even be interested. Fleur...yes. Her sister...no."

Remus looked at him with his big, almost wolfish eyes and said, "Yea, I smelled it the first time they were together. Really hard to miss, actually. What surprises me is that neither Harry nor Hermione have said anything at all about it to us. They must really feel that it's not any of our business."

What surprised the Lycanthrope most was the singular tear that invaded his friend's left eye after his casual statement and the very sad, pained look on the man's face. It was something he had seen only a couple times during the twenty-five years he had known the man. Sirius Black was not one known for showing sadness – or any of his inner feelings, to anyone – so the moment caught Remus off-guard.

Finally, Remus got up the courage to ask what the matter was, though he suspected that he already knew the answer, after reflecting on what he had last said. "What is it?"

Sirius shook his head; obviously trying to fight off his strong emotions, before he gave up and said, "Harry's trusted us to this point. What changed?"

Remus half-smiled at his friend and then lifted his own snifter – Tequila instead of Brandy – and said, "It's not a matter of trust, Sirius. It's a matter of a young man becoming an adult and trying to keep to himself what he thinks a man ought to keep to himself. You've not heard him speak at all of his relationship with Hermione and their relationship with Hannah is almost as new – and certainly much different – than anything they expected to happen. There must be a lot more too it than sex though, if I'm right. Harry's not the type to make a commitment to one girl and then go running off to someone new a couple of months later. His bonding with Hermione was more powerful than anything I've ever seen before and I know that Druid Cathbad felt the same way. I think though that they will tell us when they're ready to tell us and not before-hand."

Nodding, Sirius said "What do you thinks' going on between the three of them?"

"No idea, Sirius. Whatever it is though, Harry's involved and there's probably some kind of problem that Hannah's asked him to solve. Something she can't solve on her own and that Harry's uniquely positioned help with. You know how Hermione's always said that he has a 'saving people thing'. Well, I think it's one of those...but damn me if I can prove it right now."

Somehow, that made the younger man feel better and soon, the two school-mates were trading stories about James and Lily and the days that first brought the four of them together.

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MI-5 & ¾ - Directorate F - Thames House – Millbank, London, UK,
Monday, October 9, 1995

John Christian Percival Avery sat at his desk under the buzzing, florescent light, trying to assemble the reams of information that had been sent to him via his agents and the more he read, the more confused he became. One bit of news was that the SAS sniper teams stationed in Scotland reported having killed thirty-six of the Death-eater terrorists for whom the 'shoot-to-kill' order had been issued. That was good, at least according to 'Whiskers' ("Minerva", he thought privately, though he was never, ever going to associate the moniker with the sources' Christian name) and (hopefully) put them in a tract towards eventual success.

On the other hand, two of his agents in London had reported loss-of-contact with several of the individuals who had been marked as 'persons of interest' to Her Majesty's government and that worried him. On the list were ten names: Arthur Weasley, Molly Weasley, Albus Dumbledore, Aberforth Dumbledore, Algernon Croaker, Broderick Bode, Lucius Malfoy, Narcissa Malfoy, Elphias Dodge, and Mafalda Hopkirk. Having powerful wizards simply drop off the radar was something that concerned his department even when things were quiet and things were not currently anything like 'quiet'.

A third bit of news was that something had happened to the wizard banking system in England. The reporting agent was unsure whether it had collapsed or had been deliberately closed. However, the agent was certain that no witch- or wizard-owned businesses still operated anywhere in the Kingdom. Avery tried to make sense of that in the context of everything else he knew and was having a hard time doing so. On the one hand, since there had been such a large outward migration of magicals from the UK, it probably stood to reason that they had taken their businesses with them. However, there had always been wizard banking in the UK for as far back as records existed, with strong indications that it went back a great deal further than that. His gut told him that a total collapse of the magical economy in the UK had to mean something more – but what? He highlighted that portion of his agents' report and made a note in the margins of the five-page report to follow up on that later.

Leaning back a little in his Herman Miller Aaron chair, Avery thought about the other thing that was very, very worrying. It was the fact that non-magical individuals kept turning up dead due to 'unknown circumstances or forces' in and around southern Scotland. That was usually the give-away that someone or something magical was involved. The latest count was sixty-two, while the previous count was fifty-seven. Again, he made a note to himself on his standard yellow legal pad to follow up. There was something niggling at him in the back of his mind that he should attach more import to it than he was at the moment, which said something indeed, because it was becoming increasingly difficult to keep the deaths quiet and yet his department had to do so. Not doing so had the potential of creating a catastrophic political fire-storm and that was the last thing his department, and his PM, needed.

One blind spot for the super-spook was the fact that he was totally unaware that the PM had a highly magical body-guard and that every one of his reports was being compromised right into said body-guards' hands, for analysis by those on the magical side who still strove to protect the Statute of Secrecy and the existence of the magical world. It was something that he hadn't even considered, despite the fact that good spy-craft included thinking about things like, "What happens if the information that I am passing on is compromised?" and "What would it mean if those upon whom we are spying become aware of that effort and take active steps to prevent it from happening?".

John Avery would eventually learn the huge, personal cost was of not considering such questions.

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Five hours later - 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

There was a tense atmosphere in the house along the St. Laurent River that everyone felt. Every included Hannah Abbott, as Harry and Hermione had been forced into revealing to Hermione's parents, Sirius, Remus, Septima (who, all but for the presence of a ring, was Sirius' new fiancé), Bethany St. Bertrand [who, while not family yet, was glued to Remus], and finally, Minerva McGonagall, that Hannah was going to become Harry's and Hermione's joint mistress and would serve them in that capacity for the rest of her life. It was a bombshell that had rocked the adults (except for Sirius and Remus, who took it with considerable equanimity) and created a great deal of agitation – which would have been worse and gone on longer – if it hadn't been for the pressing matter of Fleur and Gabrielle Delacour. Hermione thought that her parents might still not be completely alright regarding Hannah, but she couldn't help it for the moment.

The seven were assembled in the living-room, arrayed in a semi-circle, with wands drawn, when the tell-tale wave of ambient magical pressure suddenly sprang into existence; heralding the imminent arrival of someone or something by portkey.

A moment later, four people stepped gracefully out of a blue-and-white magical vortex and found themselves surrounded by drawn wands and serious expressions.

"Don't move. Don't make even attempt to go for a wand" Harry said, taking charge of the moment. Sirius looked somewhat affronted by Harry's usurpation of his 'authority', until he looked at his charge and realized that wand or no, the boy was radiating power that he couldn't ever hope to match. All of the things that Harry had accomplished in the short months since they had fled England – from his total destruction of Isabelle Gatineau – to his growing power to do anything magically, without incantation or wand – all jelled in an instant. Harry Potter's magic, in and of itself, might very well be "the power that he knows not."

" 'Arry!" Fleur said, alarmed and surprised by the reception.

Before the staggering beautiful blonde could take a single step towards him, he said "What did you call me when we were first introduced in the room behind the Great Hall?"

Fleur giggled. "A 'leettle boy".

Harry smiled at her blush, turned to Gabrielle and said, "What did you say to me after the second task?"

Gabrielle looked confused and as though she had been caught off-guard. Finally she said, "Nothing. We never spoke."

It was the right answer and Harry visibly relaxed; signaling everyone to lower his/her wand a bit. "It's good to see you, Fleur. You too, Gabrielle. I'm sorry for the reception, but I had to make sure."

Gabrielle looked at Harry with wide eyes. This Harry was not the one she expected. He was taller by maybe three inches, stronger, more self-assured, and radiating incredible power – the likes of which she had never felt before. Curiously though, she didn't feel drawn to him like her sister said she did. It worried her.

Before anyone had a chance, Jean-Sebastian extended his hand, which Harry took. "Lord Potter, thank you for letting us visit you. We have much to discuss". He glanced at his daughters and then at his wife.

"Where are we anyway?" Aimee Delacour asked.

Sirius, seeing an opportunity, stepped closer. "We'll get to that. However, let us first deal with the important things. Your rooms are up on the second floor. Dobby will show you. Once you've gotten a chance to settle in, we can share a glass of wine – you'll be surprised to learn how good the local vintages are – and get down to brass tacks." There were nods all around. "Dobby!" Sirius said into the air.

"!Pop!"

"You called, Master Sirius?"

Sirius smiled at the wonderful, albeit slightly nutty elf. "Yes I did, Dobby. Would you walk the Delacours up to their rooms and help them settle in? Once they've unpacked, could you escort them back down here?"

Dobby nodded. He knew damn well why he was being asked to escort the Delacours. Not only was there a Fidelius in place (which Remus had placed, with Minerva's help), that would prevent the Delacours from being able to remember how to get around the house, but if any one of them was not who he said he/she was – in other words, if one or more of them was using Polyjuice – Dobby would be there to deal with it. He had his own, extraordinary magic and was more than a match for an individual witch or wizard, especially one whom he could take by surprise, which would be easy, since he was on his 'home turf'.

Dobby nodded to the Delacours and extended one hand, in a very human move, towards the stairs.

Once the Delacours had left the room, Sirius lifted his wand again, rounded on Harry, and was about to start chastising him or hexing him for what he had done when he realized that Harry was watching him, with his hands suddenly glowing again with gathered magic – as if he were wearing the magic itself like a pair of white snow gloves. "You wanted something, Sirius?" Harry said; his voice controlled but edgy.

Septima, who was used to being around Albus Dumbledore and the amazing powers that the Headmaster had wielded so casually, realized that the situation could suddenly turn ugly and go very badly for Sirius if he provoked Harry, so she put a gentle, but restraining

hand on her fiancé's shoulder. "Careful, Siri. I don't think Harry's in the mood."

Hannah and Hermione, who had both instinctively moved closer to Harry and lifted their wands, looked at the assembled adults in the room and saw something that they didn't expect: fear. Hermione, because she was truly the brightest witch of her age, immediately sussed out what the real issue was and decided that Harry had been in the right to do what he had done, even if it bothered the adults. "Put your wand down, Sirius. Harry was right to do what he did, even if you don't like it." Her voice was firm, though not threatening.

Sirius looked at her and then at Harry and realized that he was being foolish. He slowly lowered his wand and then put it away; down into an inside pocket of his robe. Once he relaxed, Remus did as well, though to his credit, he had never lifted his wand to threaten Harry. Any student who was capable of repelling more than one hundred Dementors was someone worth giving a wide berth.

Minerva McGonagall, who had watched the entire scene play out, turned and faced Sirius, who was closest to the fireplace. "You're being a fool, Sirius, now stop it. Harry was only doing what he thought was right to protect us all. He's far more protective than you could ever imagine being and I, for one, am comforted that he is so careful. His bond-mates seem to agree with what he's done and I can't say that I'm exactly happy to be seen in their eyes as 'a troublesome adult'.

Harry's hands almost immediately stopped glowing and he looked over at his transfiguration professor with what most would have called an expression of love, or at least deep affection and appreciation. She returned it happily and in equal measure.

Hermione smiled at Harry across their bond, as she felt him experience the kind of joy that she knew he associated with parental affection and pride.

"It's good to be loved" she thought to him.

Harry sent a wave of love at her in response, which caused Hermione's eyes to flutter and made her weak in the knees.

"What are you going to do about Fleur and Gabrielle?"

"Exactly what you suggested, I think. It's the most straight-forward way of dealing with it. I'm dead certain that Gabrielle is simply in love with the idea of being in love and has no bond to me at all. Fleur, on the other hand....well, I'm sure that I did save her life and that she knows that I did. If that's what makes a Veela willing to bond...." Harry left the rest unsaid, though Hermione was pretty sure she knew the rest.

"So we add a Veela to our bond?" She asked silently; her tone not conveying any animosity towards the idea.

"Think so. Would it bother you if she becomes Lady Gryffindor?"

Hermione squeezed Harry's hand and shook her head. "No. Lady Potter is the only title about which I ever dreamed. Now that it's real, I'm happy. The rest can sod off."

Harry smiled and pulled his beloveds closer. He leaned his head close to Hannah and, after kissing her neck in a most affectionate way, whispered in her ear, "We'll tell you everything that's going on in a few minutes....but you need to know that Fleur will probably be joining the three of us."

Hannah turned her head and kissed the side of Harry's mouth before whispering, "It's all good. Just as long as I have you and Hermione..."

"Minx" Harry replied playfully.

Hannah's perfume was driving Harry a little mad and she could feel his erection straining against his slacks. "You know it, love."

The interplay between Harry and Hannah had not gone unremarked and both Sirius and Remus felt passing pangs of jealousy that Harry had not one amazing, breath-taking, knock-your-socks-off girl, but rather two of them and was about to add a third...and a Veela no less.

However, both Sirius and Remus were grown adults and had other concerns. Both of them, though, were still susceptible to the pull of love and it had taken Remus by surprise that he was developing

feelings for Bethany St. Bertrand, whom he had taken into his constant company.

Bethany had moved into their circle of companions after she had returned from meeting with the Goblins and had taken an almost instant liking to Remus. So much so that she had volunteered to take over the brewing of the Wolfsbane potion for him. There wasn't much of an age difference between the two, only a couple of years, so they both liked many of the same things and shared many of the same values. The change that had come over the older Marauder was noticeable, even though he tried to hide it.

The Delacours came back down the stairs an hour later, looking no worse for wear – which meant that Dobby had not needed to 'subdue' any of them because of suspected Polyjuice use.

Jean-Sebastian and Aimee Delacour led their daughters, both of whom had changed into pretty, flowing; blue-linen dresses that Harry thought were very reminiscent of the ones that he had first seen them in at Hogwarts, but without the decorative silk brocade work or the ridiculously fancy, high collars and over-capes.

Once they were in the living room, Harry bade them sit and asked Dobby to bring up several bottles of the best wine that they owned – which was a lot – since Sirius and Remus had taken to collecting the best vintages that the country offered.

Lying on the table between the parties were copies of the letter that Jean-Sebastian had written to Sirius. Hermione, Hannah, and Harry had all read it, as had the rest of the adults present, so the contents of the letter were known to all. Sirius had thought that sharing the letter was simply better for the family's politics (if one were to consider the assembled adults and teenagers a family of sorts) than keeping the contents secret.

Jake and Miranda sat in the far corner, watching, as they had no direct role in what was about to happen, nor did they have any claims, magical or otherwise, to assert. They wanted what was best for Hermione, and that was that. What they didn't know was whether adding a French (read 'foreign') witch to the mix was good for anyone. Jake still had some residual prejudices regarding the French and the Vichy government that had ruled France during WWII. Several of his English relatives who had gone underground

with the resistance had been turned over by the Vichy to the Germans, who in turn, executed them. That was more than enough reason, Jake had always thought, to dislike the French. For Hermione's sake however, Jake had promised Miranda that he would behave himself and listen to what the Delacours had to say. Miranda, he knew, would see to it in one hundred and one small and deliciously evil ways, that he regretted it if he didn't.

The wine, having been poured out liberally for everyone present, including Gabrielle, Jean-Sebastian rose and held his glass up. "To our host, Harry Potter, and to his heroism in saving my daughters."

"Here, here" the group around him replied. Blushing, Harry looked at the head of the French DMLE (the "Département pour l'Application de la loi Magique") and inclined his head in acknowledgement of the man's toast.

Sirius rose from where he was seated and with glass in hand said, "Thank you all for being here. Harry, Hermione, and I want to see resolution and closure for this matter and I think I can say with fair assurance that Hannah would appreciate it as well, for her own reasons. I can now tell you that Harry Potter resides at 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec."

A wave of subtle magic washed over the four Delacours and Harry thought that he could almost see it as the protections granted by the Fidelius charm were magically accepted by each in turn and the secret became buried in their souls.

Fleur was the first to look at Harry and smile, once she realized that she now knew where she was. Gabrielle followed her sister and was then joined by their parents.

For the first little while, the whole group made small talk and drank the wine, even as the conversation slowly swung around to the real issue at hand. Food was then passed around and the adults seemed satisfied, for the most part, to leave the 'kids' (including Fleur and Gabrielle) to their own accord. Eventually though, Harry found himself sitting with the four girls around him, while the adults who were seated along the long, plush sofa across from them turned to face Harry, Hermione, and Fleur.

Minerva surprised them all by breaking open the conversation. Her voice was as gentle as it had ever been during any of the times that Harry had been pulled into her office. "How long have you known about this, Harry, Fleur?"

Fleur turned sideways on the sofa to look at Harry and they exchanged a meaningful look. Hermione, who then caught the blonde girls' attention, moved her head just so, which gave the slightly older girl the go-ahead to speak first.

"J'en ai été au courant depuis la deuxième épreuve du Tournoi, pourtant notre lien vraiment commencé à grandir à la fin de Septembre" (I knew about it since the second test of Tournament, however our link really began to grow at the end of September.) Hermione listened to what the beautiful girl had said in French and began to nod. She immediately shared it with Harry, who turned to Fleur and said, "I didn't know. Why didn't you say something to me before you left Hogwarts?"

Fleur looked at him and then said, in a voice just above a whisper, "Ego eram in religio vos quod ego eram incertus super quis vos vires reputo o vos vires narropraeter Cedric eram iuguolo". ("I was in fear of you and I was uncertain about what you might think or say after Cedric was killed"). It took a longer moment for Hermione to work out what Fleur had just said, as it was in fairly rough Latin, but she did and then silently translated for Harry. There were questioning looks all around, as no one else seemed to have understood what Fleur had just said. Harry was about to reply when he saw that Sirius was about to say something. In response Harry stood up, quickly joined by both Hannah and Hermione. "I think, Monsieur and Madame Delacour, that the best way to handle this matter is for both Fleur and Gabrielle to follow us. We will retire to our room and there we will test Fleur's and Gabrielle's claims. If Hermione is right and I'm very sure she is, we will know very quickly whether there are life-debts involved or not." Hermione blushed at Harry's praise and squeezed his hand gently while whispering in his mind "Love you too!"

Sirius looked at Harry, wondering whether he ought to be surprised at the young man's actions. Harry saw the look on his step-father's face (for indeed, that is how Harry had come to regard the Marauder. "Let me do this, Sirius. You know I have to...that there's no other way."

The other adults in the room (outside of Aimee and Jean-Sebastian) – Hermione's parents, Septima, Bethany, and Minerva – were unsure of what to say. Each had tried to prepare him/herself for what this confrontation might be like and now, with the moment in front of him/her they were unable to do much other than quietly, and without acrimony, accede to Harry's wishes.

Five minutes later, Harry and the four girls were in the master-suite; spread out on the more-than-king-sized bed that dominated the room. Hannah and Hermione looked reasonably composed Harry thought, considering what was about to happen, while Fleur looked both nervous and excited. Gabrielle looked tense; unsure about what was going to happen to her or be asked of her.

Kicking off his shoes and sitting back, Harry took Hermione onto his lap. She was there as both a comfort to him (something she knew immediately, because of their extremely private, silent dialog) and a female buffer between him and the two Delacour girls.

"Get it over with, Harry. Gabrielle isn't for you and you know it" Hermione said, without rancor.

"I know. I just don't want to hurt her feelings. I think she's put a lot of herself into this moment."

"She has, but she's a little girl still and her emotions are exactly those of a little girl. Better to let her go now, feeling a little sad, than to give her a mistaken idea of her place in your life and have her hurt worse later on."

Harry knew that Hermione was right and that he couldn't put it off any longer. Looking over to Gabrielle, whose eyes had been on him constantly since they entered the bedroom, Harry said, "Gabi? There is something I need you to do. It will not hurt, ok? First I want you to move here, to the edge of the bed" The girl nodded and moved into position to comply. He looked at Hermione and then Hannah before turning back and saying softly, but with a voice that brooked no uncertainty, "Now strip off. Down to your knickers."

Immediately, Gabrielle's jaw dropped and he watched as she looked passed him and at her sister in panic. That was all it took for Harry to know that, just as he had suspected, Gabrielle had not given her

bond to him. He knew it to be true because if there had been such a bond, it would have compelled her to do what Harry asked.

Sensing that her sister was about to freak out, Fleur moved off the bed and to her sisters' side. "Venez avec moi, Gabrielle. Harry n'est pas l'homme pour vous. Maman et Papa ne seront pas fâché. Vous avez aucun raison d'avoir peur." (Come with me, Gabrielle. Harry is not the one for you. Mother and father will not be upset. You have nothing to be afraid of.) The younger, but no less beautiful blonde Veela looked at Harry with sadness in her eyes, but no tears. She understood what had just happened; that she had been tested and that she did not have a true magical debt to Harry...or at least, not the kind that would forever bond her to him. Turning away silently, she let her sister lead her out of the room and back down the stairs to where her parents awaited.

Fleur was back up to the room in short order, to Harry's relief, and she closed and locked the door behind her with a smile. Harry, Hermione, and even Hannah all breathed a sigh of relief as they saw her enter. Each had worried that Gabrielle's feelings would overshadow the more important situation with her older sister and they were all looking forward to having the situation resolved. Hermione excused herself and, unlocking the door, slipped out into the corridor – wand in hand. A moment later she was back. Immediately, she resumed her prior position next to Harry.

Sashaying to the side of the bed nearest Harry and his two loves, Fleur looked at them with a certain wicked, happy, even mischievous gleam in her eyes and said lavaciously, "Command me, 'Arry."

And command her he did, even as he felt Hermione reach between his legs to grasp and then begin stroking his hard cock through his slacks. The way she did it – the way she leaned into him and the way he looked at her when she did so - made it a very possessive move and the message to Fleur was clear, despite the immediate situation. It came across as "He's mine, got it?"

"Strip....I want to see....." Harry croaked out; fighting the desire to scream out his need to be naked with his two loves and to bury himself balls-deep in his wife's beautiful body or between the cheeks of Hannah's perfect ass.

Fleur thought she had a very good idea about what Harry wanted to see and so she immediately began to put on her sexiest show. She had never undressed in a male's presence before (except her father's), but some of her older friends who had done so had told her that drawing out the show was the best thing.

Grateful that the dress was one that had few buttons, the virginal but very aroused Veela undid them while keeping her eyes firmly fixed on Harry and on what Hermione's hand was doing to him through his pants. Undoing each in turn, Fleur let the top of the dress fall open; exposing her unrestrained, perfect breasts to her about-to-be-lover's gaze.

Harry's eyes flicked down once; twice, and then rose again to settle on her face...something that really surprised Fleur. She was sure that Harry was not going to be able to take his eyes off her body, so seeing that he was able to fixate on her face amazed her. It also turned her on, because it showed Fleur how strong Harry's emotional and magical control was...stronger than any other man of whom she had ever heard.

Rising to the challenge, Fleur began moving from side to side; cupping her now exposed breasts with both hands and then running her hands down the front of her body and then back up her sides. It was as though she was being felt up from behind by a sensuous lover and the sight of it turned on not just Harry, but Hermione and Hannah as well.

Fleur knew that she had them – Harry, Hermione and Hannah – within her control when she saw the raw, unrepentant desire in their eyes. They were watching her every move...as if they longed to copy those moves themselves. Unbuttoning the last two buttons that held the dress closed, Fleur let it fall into a puddle at her feet; leaving her in the soft, cornflower-blue, cotton bikini knickers which she had chosen with great care before getting dressed not two hours earlier.

Hermione and Harry seemed to move as one, flowing from where they sat on the bed; ending up on their knees in front of her. Hannah joined them and soon, there were three pairs of hands exploring her body. For Fleur, it was joyous. She had never been worshipped this way and it was indescribably erotic. Harry's lips made their way

down, tortuously slowly, from the soft skin around her belly-button to the elastic edge of her knickers, kissing and nuzzling as he went.

Harry, of course, wasn't the only the only one who was busy. Hermione and Hannah had both stripped down to their knickers as well and had magically disrobed Harry, so that they were free to let their hands, mouths, and breasts wander all over his chiseled, hard body.

Gripping Harry's rampant erection in her right hand, Hermione found out just how excited Harry was by what was happening. She watched him kiss Fleur's body through her knickers, inexorably making his way down to the gusset-covered, hairless cleft between the tall girl's legs.

Harry could feel Hermione's eyes on him, so he turned his head away from what he was doing so that he could kiss his wife and soul-mate. Hermione leaned into the kiss, even as she continued to stroke him, and the fire in their souls for each other threatened to divert them away from what Harry had to do in regards to the Veela before them.

"Do her, Harry. Make her yours and then we'll sort out the rest" Hermione thought to him as they broke the kiss.

Turning back, Harry began kissing the French girl through her knickers again. He loved seeing/touching/feeling/kissing a girl in her knickers – a fetish Hermione and Hannah knew all about and one which they happily endorsed and encouraged – and so he happily lost himself in exploring Fleur that same way.

At the same time, Fleur used her free hands to run her fingers through Harry's wild, lush raven-black hair and to caress and play with own breasts while the trio kneeling about her touched her and each other. She couldn't see Hermione's hands on Harry, but she could hear their moans of desire and see their faces and that was more than enough to push her to the very precipice of her first orgasm at the hands of another person.

Soon, Harry used his hands to coax her to turn around and bend over the bed, face-down. When she did so, she felt Harry's hot breathe on her ass, then between her legs, and felt his incredibly warm hands caressing the insides of her thighs, before they pushed

her legs apart. That's the moment when she knew that Harry was going to do what she had dreamed of for so long. He was going to take her from behind and make her his. She didn't have to beg him or even say anything.....but she couldn't help but moan and rock her hips up and down.

Hands, male and female, slid the soft knickers down her body, so that they fell into a small, intimate heap about her ankles. A tongue, long, wet, and hot, pushed its way into her exposed sex; tasting and exploring as it went. Hands clutched her bottom and well-manicured nails traced erotic patterns on her skin as she was thoroughly eaten out. She, an extraordinarily beautiful Veela from a well-known and well-respected Veela family...a girl who had the power to completely enthrall any non-Veela male, was herself being enthralled.

One...two....three huge mind-crushing orgasms rampaged through her body; reducing her to a gibbering pile of well-satisfied goo that melted onto the bed, face-first.

An eternity later, Fleur Delacour felt three pairs of hands turning her over, so that she lay flat on her back. There was flickering candle-light all around; softly illuminating the room and the three smiling faces that were looking down at her, as they knelt on each side. She looked at Harry first, wondering why he hadn't yet made love to her. "Ready for some more?" he said playfully.

Fleur wasn't sure what to say. She knew what was *supposed* to happen, but she didn't want to force Harry into something for which he might not yet be ready. However, she also didn't want to miss out on something, if they were just waiting for a signal from her that she was ready. Reaching out, she wrapped one hand softly about the end of his raging erection. It was wet and slick...and felt enormous. She had never seen something that was its equal. The thought boggled her mind that Hermione and Hannah had been pleased by the fleshy spike and that they could actually take it all in. As if her mind was being read, Hermione leaned over, lifted Fleur's hand away from it, opened her mouth, and then took it all the way down her throat. Hannah giggled when she saw Fleur's look of absolute incredulity. "She's good, isn't she?"

Fleur could only nod. She had never seen anything like it...even when she had accidentally walked in on her parents while her mother was doing the same thing to her father. Harry's todger was

half-again larger than her father, which put him on the far right side of huge.

When Hermione came back up for air, she had a long trail of pre-cum trailing from her lips, which she licked up eagerly. The sight of it made Fleur furiously wet and made her sex clamp down in direst need. She looked up at Harry and said, with an intensity that she had never felt before, "Fuck me, 'Arry."

Harry nodded. He had been hoping desperately that Fleur would ask, so that he didn't feel like he was taking her against her will, and he was grateful to hear her ask so forcefully. Hermione and Hannah moved into position on either side of her as Harry moved above the girl who was about to become his lover and consorted mate. Fleur knew that Harry was about to claim her and to accept her bond with him.

"Do it, Harry. Fuck her hard" Hermione thought to him, her 'voice' heavy with lust.

Harry's response was to push into the girl who lay beneath him; so that his hips met hers and they were finally joined. They both cried out with the pleasure of it and it was all that Harry could do to keep from falling forward onto her. His arms and shoulders, strong from Quidditch and from the physical training that they had been doing since early in the summer, kept him up, so that he could look into her eyes as he began to pump into her.

Hannah and Hermione gazed, almost completely mesmerized, as their Harry claimed the Veela in the most primitive and basic way possible and they felt their magic reach out to him and to Fleur. Hermione grinned as she looked across the moving bodies and saw her lover push a free hand down into her knickers and moved to do the same thing. Neither could help it, given the powerfully erotic sight before them. It was a move that they had done a number of times together, when Harry was watching, in order to tease him or to coax him away from his studies and both loved the feeling of watching and being watched.

Because of Hermione's earlier ministrations, Harry couldn't and didn't last long inside the beautiful Veela. He came inside her with a yell; pumping volley after volley of his cream deep into her womb. Hannah and Hermione came as well and collapsed onto the bed, so that they lay close, on either side of their new bond-mate.

Still inside her, Harry fell into her arms, finally, and kissed her with both joy and satisfaction. Fleur wrapped her arms tightly around him, pulling him close, happy that the incessant need that she had felt was finally satiated (for a time) and that the desperate desire she had had to bond with the wonderful wizard in her arms had been fulfilled. One thing that amazed her was the fact that she could feel his presence in her mind now: His fears, joys, desires, and the overwhelming need that he had for the one true love in his life, Hermione. She could also feel his commitment to her and his willingness to do anything necessary to protect and care for her.

The realization that he could never love her in quite the same way or with the same intensity that he loved Hermione didn't hurt the way one might have expected though, because she had never dreamed that it would even be possible. The bonding of two peoples' magic (as her Veela magic had bonded to his) didn't mean that there would also be a bonding of emotions as well. The two things could (and often did) go hand-in-hand, as they did between Harry and Hermione, but it wasn't always the case. She knew in her heart and soul that what she had now was good enough. She would grow to love Harry, because she knew that he was kind, lovable, and good, and she knew that he would always protect and cherish her. That was more than most witches had and she wasn't going to look a gift-Hippogriff in the mouth. Plus, she thought happily as Harry lay in her arms, she would have the love of two wonderful bond-mates. Life was good.

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The living-room, 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

Two hours had passed since Harry, Hermione, Hannah, and Fleur had disappeared upstairs, to the master-suite and the adults in the room had begun speculating, discreetly, as to what had happened. Sirius had made snarky comments about Hermione wanting to 'convene a committee' to discuss the problem, while Septima and Minerva were making quiet comments to each other about which of the witches were going to be bow-legged in the morning. Minerva thought she had a pretty good handle on what Hermione was really all about while Septima thought she had a pretty good bead on Hannah. Aimee Delacour had refused to speculate out loud, though privately she thought that there was a good chance that when

Fleur's Veela blood asserted itself, that all of the girls would end up 'walking funny' in the morning.

Jean-Sebastian Delacour, Jake Granger, and Remus Lupin were trying to be gentlemen and not comment on what they thought could be happening, though each of them wondered whether he would ever have been up to the challenge of satisfying three witches. Jake and Jean-Sebastian both knew heart-of-hearts that there was no way that either of them could have 'done the deed'. Remus was not so certain. Lycanthropy had some unique benefits to it and stamina in the bedroom was one of them. Bethany had found that out fairly recently, to her everlasting joy.

At the two-and-one-half-hour mark, Miranda slipped out of the room and up the stairs, in order to find out what had happened. She wasn't usually an impatient woman, but the circumstance was unique and she wasn't willing to wait any longer for an answer.

She got as far as the 2nd floor hall when she found herself off the floor, spread-eagled, naked, and unable to move forward or even struggle. The sensation was unpleasantly like walking into a net you couldn't see and being unable to extricate one's self from it.

Another half-hour passed before anyone noticed that she was gone. It was a further five minutes before anyone magical found her and ten minutes beyond that when they were finally able to release her.

"What the hell just happened!" she screeched; desperately trying to protect her what might be left of her dignity with both hands.

"Aiye.....You've walked into one'na Hermione's famous wards, I think" Minerva said, her Scottish brogue appearing as she tried to contain her laughter.

Remus appeared behind Minerva and Septima (who had been the ones to find Miranda) and said, "Be grateful that it wasn't one of Harry's wards, Miranda. He's less gentle about repelling unwanted visitors." The two witches tried to guard her privacy, but weren't able to keep Remus from getting an eyeful of an older version of Hermione. He saw that she was every bit as delicious as her daughter, and that Harry was a lucky SOB (*son of a Black)

Miranda cocked an angry eye at him when she saw his leering grin, but said nothing. She got the feeling that as long as Hermione stayed entrenched in the magical world, that she and her husband were going to run into situations like this. She was right, of course, but no one thought it polite to point that out to them. It was something they were just going to have to deal with on their own or with Hermione.

After Minerva conjured clothes for her and she was able to dress, the group trundled back down the stairs once Miranda was free and made themselves comfortable once again in the living-room. Dobby and Winky brought around more food, in the form of appetizers from a dozen different cuisines, and more wine and the group went back to waiting.

Finally, at the three-and-a-half hour mark, four very satisfied-looking teenagers joined them in the living-room. Harry was grinning ear-to-ear as Hermione sat on his lap and Hannah and Fleur took up positions on either side. Remus was the first to notice that Hermione was no longer the only one wearing a ring on her left hand. The one that Fleur sported was in keeping with the mystical birthstone of her January birthday: a large, deep, rich green Emerald; internally flawless, and cut in a marquise-cut, which fit her delicate finger beautifully. Hannah wore her new, deep blue, flawless solitaire Sapphire equally proudly and sported a new platinum choker with the letter 'P' dangling from the center link, marking her forever as Mistress Potter.

None of the teenagers felt the need to say anything to the adults, so they laid into the food which remained on the platters. When those were gone, Dobby brought more, until the four were satiated.

After about ten minutes, Miranda couldn't stand it any longer and said, "Well? You going to tell us what happened?" Her tone of voice was direct and calibrated to get her only daughter's attention.

Hermione looked up, swallowed the mouthful she had just grabbed, wiped her mouth delicately, and then said, "No."

Jake Granger waited for Mount St. Granger to erupt and it was just about to when Sirius, Remus, Minerva, Harry, Hermione, Hannah, Bethany, and Septima dove off the sofa; grabbing their wands as

they did so. A moment later, an enormous blue-and-white vortex appeared in the middle of the room.

A second later, two figures appeared; both sporting bright red hair....

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MWAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH...my first cliffie.

Stay tuned!

As usual, I would ask you to PLEASE leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter Twelve – "A Weasley's Sacrifice"

By the_scribbler

the_scribbler (at) shadowgard (d*t) com

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER (eventually) SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

Note Two: On page 14, I reference the Féile Moingfhinne. Information about that festival can be found on the web at [en*Wikipedia*org/wiki/Samhain](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samhain). I would also recommend reading: Three Irish Glossaries: Cormac's Glossary, O'Davoren's Glossary and a Glossary to the Calendar of Oengus the Culdee. London: Williams and Norgate, 1862. 1-44

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From Chapter Eleven – "Gatherings"

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And now.....Chapter Twelve – "A Weasley's Sacrifice"

"STUPEFY!" A half-dozen voices cried out at once; the combined magical energy sending the two people slamming into the floor, where they lay, unmoving.

Immediately, Bethany St. Bertrand and both Grangers (both of whom had advanced medical training) leapt to examine the two fallen people. Bethany's wand was out while the Grangers moved in to check for pulses and to check for any other injuries. Once their preliminary work was done and it was decided that the combined

attack hadn't stopped their hearts, as Minerva feared, Bethany took over and made sure that the two weren't intruders using polyjuice.

After the initial drama had concluded, Harry and his girls pulled Sirius and Remus into another room; closing the door both physically and magically. It was clear from the look on Harry's face that he wasn't happy with his two step-fathers. Rounding on the two men, Harry said "Just what the fuck do you think you were doing, giving those two a port-key RIGHT INTO OUR HOME? DID ALASTOR TEACH THE TWO OF YOU NOTHING?"

A part of Remus was amused by Harry's anger, given that there wasn't a single bit of any of the three girls presently arrayed around him that didn't reek (to his wolfish senses) of Harry Potter. It was abundantly clear to him that Harry had mated with all three and that they had had intimate relations with each other as well. Another part of him, however, was taken aback that Harry could yell so loudly and be projecting such anger through his magic.

Sirius, on the other hand, was beginning to grow angry himself, feeling that Harry had no right to yell at him or chastise him for his judgment. The two looked like they might come to blows if something wasn't done, so Hermione did the obvious thing and sent a very powerful stinger at the Marauder's groin; dropping him to the ground instantly. When Harry realized that Hermione wasn't beyond doing the same thing to him, he backed away from his Godfather and let the raw magic that he had accumulated in preparation for a confrontation bleed away harmlessly.

Remus, too, backed away from the scene; making it obvious to Hermione, Fleur, and Hannah that he didn't favor either side and wouldn't interfere.

When Hermione turned to Harry, she saw that he was watching his Godfather's every move – even though the 'moves' that the older man was making were largely limited to clutching his groin and rolling from side to side on the floor.

Two minutes became ten minutes and eventually, Hermione became concerned enough that she went back out into the living-room, where Bethany had been examining their two unexpected arrivals, and asked her to join the rest of them in the study, so that she (Bethany) could do the same for Sirius.

After another long minute's passage, the accomplished healer stood and turned to Hermione. "That was a very, very foolish thing you did. You could have permanently damaged him! Why did you use such a powerful bludgeoning hex?"

"I DIDN'T!" Hermione practically screamed – both in fear and shame. "I used a stinging hex!"

Bethany looked aghast. She had never heard of someone as powerful as Sirius being felled by a stinger. "Are you absolutely certain?"

"YES! Why would I use a bludgeon when all I wanted to do was to get his attention and make him back off?"

"Gah! You did that?" she said, pointing at Sirius, "With just a stinger? Just how powerful are you, anyway?"

Hermione blushed and demurred. It wasn't a question that she wanted to answer and as Harry had told her time and again, it didn't pay to have too many people know what your real capabilities were.

Remus looked down at his friend writhing on the floor before he walked the few steps over to where Bethany stood. Putting his hand on Bethany's shoulder, he said "You don't need to know that. It's enough to know that she can protect herself."

It annoyed the healer, but she got over it quickly enough. She had to be concerned about Sirius. He was in considerable pain and other than taking away the pain – which she couldn't do because she didn't have any of the anti-Cruciatius potion that might have done the trick; there wasn't much that could be done for him.

Remus tried a 'Finite' on his friend's injury, but it didn't seem to do any good. Harry tried as well, but met with the same result. "Hermione? Can you try as well? Please?"

Bowing to her husband's silent request, Hermione cast her own Finite – which failed as well.

Bethany wanted to chew out Hermione for what she thought was a totally irresponsible act, but she was constrained by the fact that she wasn't sure why exactly nothing was working.

Ten minutes later, Sirius' pain suddenly vanished and he was able to stand up – which was both bad and good. On one hand, it was good because seeing him stand, without obvious pain, made Hermione feel slightly less guilty about what she had done, but bad on the other hand, because immediately, his first act was to lunge after his Godson, thinking that Harry had been the one who attacked him. Harry didn't have time to avoid the retired Auror's anger and the man's first and only punch laid Harry out, unconscious, on the ground with a loud crack!

Among the many of the impulsive, stupid things that Sirius had done in his life, punching Harry rated in the top three, for in the next instant, there was an almost inhuman snarl of rage from Harry's three ladies and suddenly, Sirius was smashed across the room by a massively overpowered bludger that twisted his body in awful ways, leaving him unconscious, bent, and broken.

Remus rushed to his side; immediately searching for signs of life. Bethany, too, rushed across the room and began working life-saving magic, muttering the whole time to herself about impetuous, stupid, arrogant men who thought only with their 'small heads'.

On the other side of the room, Harry lay unconscious, even as Hermione, Hannah, and Fleur turned away from watching what was happening to Sirius and knelt by his side. They could tell that his jaw was broken in at least two places and that there was blood at the point where his head had hit the floor.

Hermione was saved from having to rush out of the room to get her parent's help, when they barged in and saw the scene. Not knowing what else to do, their medical instincts took over and they separated, each rushing to his or her own patient. By silent agreement, Miranda raced to Harry's side; kneeling down to join Harry's wives in examining him.

It didn't take long for Miranda to come to the conclusion that Harry's injuries were beyond her ability to help with first aid. "I can't do anything more for him. We've got to get him to the hospital". Hermione nodded.

"Hannah, Get Minerva and tell her that we're going to need several port-keys. She can make them. We've got to take Harry to the hospital where Bethany works."

Hannah nodded, stood, and raced out of the room. When she returned, Minerva McGonagall was already holding two items – strips of cloth – that Hermione guessed were going to be enchanted as the port-keys. "Get the target for the port-keys from Bethany, Professor. She'll make sure they take us right to the trauma center."

Minerva did as she was asked and soon, Harry, his three ladies, and Miranda were holding onto the port-key. In an instant, they disappeared. Sirius, Jake, Bethany, and Remus disappeared a moment later.

A sudden stillness filled the house, leaving Minerva, Septima, the Delacours, and the two (now sleeping) Weasleys together. It was not the way that Minerva thought that the evening would pass by and she wondered, as she made her way out to the kitchen, what was going to happen between Sirius and his godson. She hoped, as she fretted about the kitchen, after putting the kettle on for tea, that the two would be able to work out their issues, because both were needed in the war that was coming.

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Early morning, Tuesday, October 10, 1995– Prime Minister's Office
– 10 Downing Street, London, UK

The normally immaculate Prime Minister's office looked like it had been hit with small tornado; such was the clutter of paperwork. There were reports everywhere and there was a person in every chair and upon every sofa in the room. Every single person present was either a member of the Cabinet or a part of the Prime Minister's national security advisory group. As such, no one present had anything less than the highest 'official' security clearance and most all had clearances that were higher than that.

At each person's feet or in each person's lap lay stacked reports that came from Directorate F of MI-5 & ¾ and every report dealt with some aspect of the magical world. The information contained in the reports ran the gamut from the mundane – explanations of how food

and clothing 'crossed over' from one world to the other all the way to detailed descriptions of the magical world's involvement in ending WWII. Once one individual was finished reading and digesting the information that he/she had been given, the piles of documents were passed onto the next person on his/her list. Not every member read or even became aware of all the reports that were present in the room, and that was by design.

In the far corner, Kingsley Shacklebolt observed the proceedings with something akin to horror or at least, horrified amazement. He realized just how little he had appreciated the Muggle fascination with learning and documenting everything that was new or different and just how much something like the existence of Magic could trigger that overwhelming urge.

The look on his face must have, he thought, given him away, because before he could 'school' his expression, the Prime Minister came over to him. "Didn't realize that we knew as much as all this?" he said, making a sweeping gesture around the room with his free hand.

Kingsley shook his head, realizing that there was nothing for it but to be honest. "No sir, I didn't. It's....alarming."

Cocking his head, the Prime Minister looked at him. "Alarming? In what way?"

It was a very fine line, Kingsley knew, that separated his responsibilities as an Auror from those of his existence as a British citizen and he wasn't at all sure whether, if he favored one side over the other, whether there would be repercussions. There wasn't much that the Muggles could do to him, short of a bullet, which the Magical world couldn't fix, so erring on the magical side was probably 'safe'...but was it right? He didn't know.

"You're having a conversation with yourself, Kingsley. I can tell by the look on your face."

Somewhat grudgingly, Kingsley nodded his acknowledgment of the truth of the man's statement. "You're right sir, I was. Sorry."

"Well, I won't pry, but I am curious about your earlier statement that what you see around us is alarming."

He yawned; excused himself, and then said, "It's alarming sir, because of the Statute of Secrecy. Our world lives in constant fear of being discovered and the magical governments all over the world have made great efforts to keeping the secret safe. If it were known that your government and the people in this room knew as much as it is apparent that you do, you would all be obliterated at best, or at worst, killed." The Prime Minister, to his credit, didn't seem to flinch at hearing about the possibility of his own death because of the knowledge that lay recorded all around them. Kingsley went on, without pausing: "That is how seriously we have always taken our secrecy." He didn't elaborate by saying that there people within the resistance movement who were probably going to push for just that when he reported back to them about the expanse of knowledge held by the Muggles. He also didn't say that he felt like a major hypocrite for helping to acquire Muggle assistance in dealing with the Dark Lord on one hand and considering the wholesale obliteration of the entire Cabinet, including the Prime Minister on other. "At least I won't be the one arguing for the killing of the entire cabinet, unlike some in the movement" he thought.

John Major thought about what he had just been told and considered just how explosive the information suddenly appeared to him to be. It was like knowing that there were, in fact, aliens from outer space and that they were living among the human population. In fact, to Major's way of thinking, that analogy wasn't too far off the mark. Magic users – witches and wizards – were alien in a great many ways. What they could do was so far ahead of anything that science or technology could do that it frightened him a great deal. More importantly, it would frighten the general populace tremendously. A scared populace is hard to govern. Mostly because people, whether in the Kingdom or anywhere else, having developed a mob-mentality, were unpredictable and could become violent. The last thing he needed was to have uncontrolled rioting on his hands. Not when his country was facing such a real and deadly magical threat.

As the hours passed on and the piles in each person's lap shrank, Kingsley Shackbolt became increasingly worried. On the faces around the room, he could read anger, fear, worry, distain, and a host of other, negative reactions. None of boded well for Muggle-Magical relations. The one good thing was that Kingsley was pretty

sure that the Prime Minister saw it as well and was level-headed enough to know how to cope with his cabinet-members' reactions.

Finally, at the five hour-mark, at about a half-one in the afternoon, the last of the reports were boxed away and sent back to their home in ultra-secure storage. Kingsley had been on his feet, observing the meeting, for almost six hours and he was starting to tire. Reaching down to his Moke-skin pouch, he fished out a Pepper-up potion. Unstoppering it, he brought it to his lips and drank it down in one go.

Having drained the vial, he vanished it wandlessly, so that no evidence of it would be left behind for the Muggles to analyze. There was no point in trying to explain to the Muggles that while most all of the ingredients for the potion came from plants that they could access, there were certain ingredients that they would never be able to obtain and further, that potion-brewing was an art and not a science and that the magical strength of the person brewing the potion did, in fact, make a great deal of difference. They wouldn't understand in the first place and there were just some things that weren't worth arguing about.

Once the Pepper-up potion hit his system, he knew that he was 'good to go' for at least another five or six hours. That would allow him time to get through what ever other meetings the Prime Minister decided to have and to do it wide-awake.

Looking around, he saw that the PM was off to one side of the almost-oval room, engaged in a heated argument with several of the highest-ranking members of the cabinet. He eased himself along the wall, so that he was close by if Major needed him, and also so that he could be there to protect him if something untoward should happen. Not that he expected anything, but it was always better to be prepared. Constant Vigilance wasn't the Auror motto for no reason. It really did save peoples' lives.

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Great Hall at Hogwarts, late afternoon, Tuesday, October 10, 1995

While Harry was recovering from his broken jaw and Sirius Black was being put back together a bit at a time, the waning rays of the early setting sun back-lit the Great Hall of Hogwarts so that only the eastern half of the enormously long room was bathed in sunlight. In

a few minutes' time, Tom Riddle knew that all of his remaining forces would be entering the hall. It was then that he knew he would have to make decisions about what to do next. He was as angry as he had ever been, but he couldn't show that anger to his followers, lest they become tempted to flee his presence and control, as Draco Malfoy had tried to do.

Things had gone very, very badly for him since the school had fallen to his control and he had begun to wonder what other mistakes he had made about which he didn't yet know. Certainly, losing Lucius to the Goblins, as well as all those that Lucius had recruited to aid his cause, was an enormous problem. Lucius had always been the 'money-man' and one of his most powerful followers. Without him, it was impossible to get access to the funds that he needed to continue his campaign. While it was true that his followers were intensely motivated by fear and by personal greed; their daily, personal needs still had to be met...and that took cold, Goblin-minted Galleons.

The other worry was food. Without sufficient food-stores, his campaign was going to go nowhere. Hungry people didn't and couldn't fight well. That made food the top priority. Once that problem had been addressed, other plans could be made – such as trying to retrieve his last remaining Horcrux. That had to be found and brought under his personal protection. It was his last safeguard and the key to his immortality.

As the enormous doors to the Great Hall opened, Tom Riddle felt a thrill of hope as the first wave of his supporters entered. There was more than thirty of them; all dressed in traditional Death Eater garb, including their ivory masks. They were led by Bellatrix Lestrange, who was outfitted in her traditional black, form-fitting dragon-hide armor and boots. Her hair, ever-curly and wild, was tamed somewhat and swept behind her like a magnificent lion's mane.

When the next group entered though, Riddle felt his chest again tighten in anger and frustration. Instead of the sixty, regimented, trained fighters, there were but twenty and not a single one looked like he or she was above the age of 16. There were no adults or young adults among them and every single one of the teenagers looked like he or she believed that his/her death was imminent. There was no pride; no strength of belief present in any one of them.

They looked like lambs destined for the slaughter, instead of warriors ready to help take over the world.

Looking around, Riddle waited for the third and final group to enter. They did. All three men.

Bellatrix looked at her master, saw his anger, and realized that many of them would be lucky to make it out of the Hall alive. She prayed, in her own twisted way, that she would be spared.

Rising from the chair that he had taken over when Dumbledore had fled, Riddle let his cloak flare out behind him. Making his way down the three steps, the Cruciatus curse was already on his lips. He would know the reason for the turnout arrayed before him or there would be blood on the floor.

"Walden!" he hissed. "Tell me something. I gave you twenty men to command. They are not here..."

"Ye...ye.....yes, my lord!" he whimpered. "They were...k...k...killed my lord."

"Killed? By whom! Who dares?" Carlos McMasters Walden was on the floor now, kneeling so that the killing blow, if it came, would kill him cleanly. He was a coward and didn't want to suffer before his death.

"Muggles, my lord! They strike from a great distance and then disappear. They have killed all my men!"

"Bah! They don't have that kind of power!"

"But they do, my lord!"

"Enough!" Riddle roared. Grabbing the man savagely by the head, the Dark Lord looked at him, eye to eye. "Give me your thoughts!" he commanded.

Unable to resist and not willing to have his mind turned to jelly by the dark lord, Carlos McMasters Walden yielded as best he could, so that the memories that Riddle was searching for would be easily taken.

For more than two minutes, the Dark Lord sifted through the man's thoughts, until he found the specific memories that he sought. When he was done, he shoved the man to the floor roughly and then stalked back up to the dais.

When he reached the top step, he turned and faced his remaining forces. "Death eaters! I have seen the truth of my servant's words. He did not lie. He did not resist. He failed me, yes, but he admitted his failure and is willing to die, if that is my will. For his courage, I spare him. However! I will not do so again. Isn't that right, Walden?"

"Ye....yes, my lord!" the man said, still on his knees, but looking upwards at his master.

Riddle nodded and then turned his attention to the second of the three men. "Avery? What is your excuse?"

It was the moment that Avery had dreaded. There was no answer that was more likely to get him killed than the one he was forced to give...but he knew that to lie to the Dark Lord was to invite the most terrible, awful punishments and he, like Carlos Walden, was a coward. Stepping forward, he fell to his knees and said simply, "They ran away, my lord."

A hush, such as could fall on the already quiet Hall, fell anew and there was a general, rushed intake of breath at the admission. If there ever was a thrill or dread of impending death, this was the moment. There was really only one way to deal with such a failure most realized, and the crowd was satisfied a moment later. "Avada Kedavra!"

The terrible green light swept through and suddenly, another life was gone at the hand of the dark lord. Bellatrix shuddered. Whether there would be more depended entirely on what the last of the three men had to say. She watched out of the corner of her eye as her master walked towards the last of the three men.

The third man had other plans though. Rather than face his chosen lord, Ephraim Jugson brought his own wand up; pointed it at his throat, and whispered "Avada Kedavra". There was an audible gasp when his suddenly lifeless body hit the floor, as the assembled Death Eaters realized that the dark lord's will had been thwarted.

Riddle looked around, as angry as he had ever been. Pointing with his wand at two of the men who had come in with the first group, he said "Selwyn! Rowle! Find his family. Bring them here. We will make an example of them; an example for all those who resist my will!"

No one was surprised by the dark lord's desire to make an example of Jugson's family.... but the fact that the Jugson family was pure-blooded for at least fifteen generations and that pure-blood families were almost never destroyed utterly escaped their collective notice.

The two men, Selwyn and Rowle, turned on their heels and made their way out the Hall, leaving behind their best mates, as well as those who were jealous of their joint ability to be free of the dark lord's presence, if only for a while.

For those left behind, it promised to be a very long and potentially fatal afternoon. The dark lord's forces had been so greatly diminished that what had once been a promising military campaign that they all hoped would leave them in complete control of the magical portions of the United Kingdom as well as wizarding Europe had become nothing more than a desperate effort to stay alive.....and the Dark Lord wasn't taking it well.

Pacing back and forth in front of the bottom step which led up to the one-time staff table, the Dark Lord looked out over the now smaller sea of faces. His voiced hissed menace, even as he increased its sibilance. "So, my faithful followers, the Muggles have decided to take up arms against us, it seems and they have abilities that we didn't foresee. What should we do to them to make them see the error of their ways?"

A man in the center of the room, less than fifty feet from where the Dark Lord stood, met the dark lord's gaze, even as others studiously tried to avoid doing so. "Yes, Mulciber? You have a thought?"

"Hit the Muggles where it hurts, my lord. Make them fear our mark. Let us destroy Camden Markets...on a Saturday morning, my lord. It will terrify the Muggles."

The dark lord's eyes widened a bit and he suddenly stopped his pacing, as if he was truly surprised by the man's suggestion. After a moment, Riddle met the man's look, which hadn't waivered at all. "I have been badly advised before, my slippery friend. Lucius

promised me that the Goblins could be swayed. He was wrong and we all know things turned out for him. Now tell me why this won't worsen our situation and tell me how this gains us new recruits."

The man, short, brutish, with a short and graying mustache and Port-wine stain on his forehead, was unsure how to reply. He honestly didn't know how to recruit followers for his lord and he suddenly realized that telling the truth could get him tortured or even killed and it scared him all the way down to his core. However, he had no real alternative. Riddle would know it if he lied. "I don't know, my lord. I'm...I'm sorry."

Riddle looked at him for a moment and then, to Mulciber's shock, simply nodded and moved on to the next person. There weren't many others willing to answer the dark lord's challenge, but some tried. All but one failed to address the recruiting issue. The one who did though, grabbed the entire room's attention. "We take the Crown Jewels, Master, and use them to raise the forces that you need."

Riddle eyed him. Taking the Crown Jewels certainly would help him raise money and it would strike at the Muggles, without the possibility of large losses of life on either side. "Tell me more" he said, with the curiosity evident in his voice.

It was a simple plan, in the end, but one that seemed at least decently thought out, which pleased the dark lord. When the man was finished speaking, Riddle looked at him thoughtfully. "Go. Finalize your plans. When they are done, bring them to me. I will lead our forces personally. We shall leave nothing to chance!"

"Thank you, my lord!" the man said fervently. "I will not fail you." Somehow, whether it was because of the man's tone or because of the way he had describe his idea, Riddle genuinely believed him.

Letting his gaze sweep the room, the Dark Lord spoke loudly, so that all could hear him. "There is much more, my faithful followers, that we must achieve if we are going to truly build a magical nation, based on pure-blood traditions. But, like all such enterprises, it must begin with a single, forward step. We will take these 'crown jewels' from the Muggles and with them create a new foundation for ourselves. Perhaps it is time that we strike out beyond the shores, to find other, like-minded wizards and witches...but those are plans for

another day. Today, we plan and we organize and tomorrow.....WE CONQUER!"

Turning on his heel, the Dark Lord strode out of the Great Hall, leaving behind him the sounds of cheering voices. As he walked the long hall back towards the private quarters which he had claimed for himself, he realized that what had just happened – his rallying of the troops, as it were, was one of the few times when he had let his passion come through and it had worked far better than he could have hoped. The experience gave him pause.

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Late afternoon, Tuesday, October 24th, 1995 - 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

Harry looked out over the river from the back deck of the house. The sun was about to set, though it was only a few minutes before four. It had been two weeks since his confrontation with Sirius and the two had yet to say even two words to each other. Sirius' anger was a palpable thing in the house and Harry hated it. Gone was the fun-loving, playful, silly Godfather that he had come to know and in his place was an angry, morose man. It was clear to Hannah, Hermione, and Fleur that though Harry shared some blame for the situation, the bulk of the responsibility for the growing antagonism lay with Sirius – and to a lesser degree, Remus. Both Septima and Bethany had done what they could to get Sirius to apologize to Harry, but he refused. Septima had even gone as far as moving out of the house and leaving Sirius behind until he did so. For his part, Harry had shown a complete willingness to apologize to the older man, if only for the sake of peace and a united front against Riddle... but was unwilling, at the same time, to risk being attacked again.

Down the road, Harry could hear cars going by and from the river came sounds of boats and barges making their way both up and downstream. From inside the house, Harry could hear the sounds of rising voices and suddenly he felt Hermione's anger spike. Without thinking about it, he disappeared; reappearing instantly at her side.

Hermione was in a low crouch, her hands out and glowing. On the other side of the room, Sirius was crouched as well, his wand out and a vicious expression on his face. Behind them came two more

apparitions; Hannah and Fleur. Their wands were out in a second and both took defensive positions next to Hermione.

Sirius snarled and was about to cast a particularly vile curse when two stunners took him down. Blinking in surprise, Harry looked around and saw that both Minerva's and Remus' wands were out.

Immediately, Hermione, Harry, Hannah, and Fleur 'stood down'; relaxing out of their attack postures. Minerva looked at Harry with a sternness that would have better accompanied her 'old' face. "What is the meaning of this and why in God's sake were you about to attack each other?"

Hermione looked up at her teacher/mentor and said sadly, "I was trying to apologize to him for the stinging hex and trying to explain why I did it. He wouldn't listen." Hermione wasn't about to tell them what Sirius had called her, because it would have been sufficient grounds (to Harry's way of thinking) to dispose of the man – godfather or not.

"Why in God's name was he trying to attack you though?"

It was Remus' turn to speak and he looked down sadly at his friend, still out cold on the floor. "He's not doing well with not being the Alpha-male in the house. He's jealous of Harry's power and the fact that Harry has three mates. More, he thinks that you" he pointed at Harry "might not need him anymore and that scares him more than anything."

Fleur, Hermione, and Hannah all felt the massive emotional surge from Harry and there was nothing that they could do to keep him from bolting across the room to where his godfather lay.

One moment Harry was beside them and in the next, he was kneeling next to his Godfather. Without thinking about he was doing, Harry focused his magic and willed his godfather awake. "Sirius! I'm so sorry! I love you."

Harry's tears fell on the man's chest and face from genuine love for his godfather – for all that Sirius had done to help Harry get over the trauma that he had suffered at Voldemort's hands during the third test of the Tri-Wizard Tournament and the moment that Sirius saw the tears, his anger fled from him.

"I.....I love you too, Harry. I'm sorry...."

Harry helped the man to his feet and threw his arms about him, as he might have, Remus thought as he looked on, if James were still with them.

What had been a potentially relationship-breaking scene became something else entirely over the next several hours, as Sirius and Harry sat and talked about everything that had happened during the previous month. Hermione stayed by Harry's side for most of the time, and both Fleur and Hannah spent time with them. They were all aware though that there were two new people in the house with whom they were going to have to deal at some point and both Fleur and Hannah spent time talking with Minerva (as the quasi-official 'matriarch' of the house) about what was probably going to have to be done with them.

Everyone was much less concerned about Mr. Weasley than they were about Ginny. Sirius, Remus, and Minerva had made it plain during several late-night arguments in the kitchen that they thought Arthur Weasley had proven again and again that he was both loyal to the light and to his friends for them to second-guess him – not to mention that he had been a loyal member of the Order of the Phoenix for a long, long time. Despite those qualities though, Arthur knew that they were wary of the possibility that he had been suborned ("turned") by Riddle's followers somehow and were watching him for signs of it.

Ginny was altogether a different problem. The first issue was her attitude. From the moment she had woken up from the multiple stunners that had hit her after her arrival, she had begun complaining that she wanted to see Harry and have time to talk to him. That she had been continually and forcefully rebuffed by everyone in the house angered her – but the fact that she had been denied a wand completely infuriated her and she said so to anyone who would listen.

The second issue was much more problematic, however. Arthur's desire to essentially 'sell' Ginny to Harry had seriously kicked up Harry's hackles. His 'saving people thing' notwithstanding, Harry felt that he didn't want to have to be responsible for Ginny's life and welfare and he let Arthur know that in the strongest possible terms.

However, when Fleur reminded him of the fact that Ginny owed him iron-clad life-debt and that it had to be addressed one way or the other, he finally relented.

Relenting, unfortunately, led to the third problem, which was what to do with her. There were two choices and neither was 100% palatable. The first choice – buying Ginny's 'contract' from Arthur, which was a tradition leftover from the days when magical society was controlled by the trade-guilds and young people were sold into multi-year servitude by their parents, left Harry in the position of having to find suitable work for the young girl and having to see to it that she stayed out of mischief.

While finding Ginny a suitable work with a master was easily addressed, since Ollivander was actively looking for an apprentice, the second issue was much thornier, since her anger, attitude problems, and lack of self-control were significant problems and could easily result in her doing something rash which would land her in wizarding prison.

The other choice was to call her life-debt. Doing so would give him three options: Call her life-debt directly (which would kill her); call her magic (which would make her into a Muggle and banish her from the magical world), or third, demand her service; making her a slave.

After a great deal of yelling and arguing, it became obvious to everyone there really was only one choice that would give Harry the necessary control, while protecting him, his wives, and all the others for whom Harry cared or loved.

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Sunset, Tuesday, October 31st, 1995 - 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

All Hallow's Eve ('Halloween') had traditionally been a bad night for Harry, but he was determined to not let that happen again, given the presence of his wives and friends, and the fact that it signaled the start of Samhain and the Féile Moingfhinne ('Festival of Mongfhionn'). There had already been multiple celebrations at school and Harry and his wives had enthusiastically attended some of them.

The Irish contingent from Hogwarts, led by Seamus Finnigan and Ernie Macmillan, were planning a massive bash for the next evening and there was a general sense of happiness about the fact that they'd all be safe, together, away from the darkness that was magical England.

As darkness fell, Harry could tell that there were children out and about the candle-and-pumpkin-lit street; trick-or-treating from house to house with their parents watching them at a thoughtful distance. Their voices were boisterous and excited and even Minerva, who was very much a traditionalist when it came to holidays, seemed satisfied that there should be so much happiness around them.

No one was going to visit their three homes, of course, because of the Muggle-repelling charms that they had carefully layered around the properties, but that didn't stop any of them from looking down the street and watching the goings-on. The costumes were a fascinating, if eclectic, collection of 'super-heroes', monsters ("Did Muggles really think that vampires looked like that?"), wizards and witches. The 'witch' costumes made Harry giggle, as they didn't look anything like his beautiful trio. Fleur thought that the costumes were all just very silly and that the whole Muggle take on the festival was a load of nonsense. Hermione concurred, but for different reasons, while Hannah thought that the witch-costumes that the Muggles had dreamed up were just totally ridiculous. Did the Muggles really think that any self-respecting witch would allow a wart like that to grow on her nose?

Around nine pm, as the moon started to rise, the group - including the four Weasleys and a goodly number of Hermione's and Hannah's soccer teammates - moved into the back yard of the 'main' home, so that they could celebrate around the bonfire that Remus and Sirius has built during the afternoon. Wearing pure white cloaks, each person carried a lit candle and brought a list of his/her private concerns and fears, written on parchment, which would be thrown into the fire after prayers were offered to Mother Earth ('Mongfhionn') and all the candles were extinguished.

The three who were unsure of the ritual were Ginny Weasley – as she had never been allowed to participate before – and the two elder Grangers. Like the rest of the magicals at the ritual, Ginny was naked beneath her robe. She had no idea that her nakedness would serve another purpose, once the clock struck midnight.

After the prayers had all been said and the candles extinguished, the group subdivided, so that all could dance around the bonfire. As the two, almost-equal chains twisted around the other and each person came face-to-face with people from the other group, there was a moment when Harry was up close to Ginny. The moment that his eyes met hers, Ginny felt a great wash of magical power and realized that she was face to face with a far different and much more powerful young man than the one she had left in Scotland, four and a half months prior. Harry radiated power and control even when he was asleep, his wives knew, but when agitated – as he became the moment he saw her - it ramped up significantly.

"Hello Ginny" he said, almost casually.

"Harry!" she squeaked in reply; her voice reflecting how much of a surprise his presence was to her.

He replied, "I will see you later, Ginny. We have some things to talk about".

"Smooth Harry. Nice control." Hermione's soft voice said in his mind.

"Considering that I hate what I'm about to do to her?" he snarked back across their link, as softly as he could.

"Just so, love. Just so" she replied, without rancor.

Ginny, for her part, was unable to form a coherent reply before the line moved on and she didn't see him again during the rest of the dance. Once it was though, she tried to find him in the flickering light of the bonfire. It shouldn't have been hard. There were only thirty-five or so people present at the celebration...but each of them was wearing his/her cowl, which effectively obscured their faces, unless you saw them face-to-face. After an hour had passed, Ginny gave up and returned her attention to the dancing and drinking.

At 11 pm, the festivities in the rest of the neighborhood had completely ceased, but the 'Hogwarts crew' was still at it. The music had morphed from the traditional Celtic dance tunes to much more modern music, which encouraged all of the teens to 'let go' a bit. What surprised Harry was the fact that both Jake and Miranda seemed to be more interested in dancing once the music changed.

On the other hand, Minerva, Bethany, Arthur, and Remus all sat down – which suited the teens just fine, as they thought the adults were in the way.

At 11:30, an unmistakable change occurred, as most of the Hogwarts-cum- L'Ecole Magique students left for the evening and a sedate calm descended on the remaining revelers. Sirius looked around while nursing his third drink of the evening and realized that Harry, his girls, and Ginny were no longer present. Making his way over to Remus, who was sitting in an overly large chair under a large tree's canopy and happily learning each subtle contour of Bethany's lips, Sirius cleared his throat and tried to get his friend's attention. After his third attempt, Bethany giggled and guided her lover's attention to his best friend. Smiling sheepishly, Remus said, "What can I do you for, Siri?"

"Have you seen Harry and his ladies?"

"Don't bother them, Siri. They're upstairs now, dealing with Ginny. Leave them alone until tomorrow....and let the Grangers know that Harry will not appreciate being bothered tonight."

Sirius nodded. He knew why Harry, his three girls, and Ginny were upstairs, and he didn't have to be told twice now to leave Harry alone. "I'll let them know. After that, I'm going to bed. I still have to talk to the Goblins about some things."

"Sleep well, Siri. I'll be talking to Arthur tomorrow, after the kids go to school. There are things that he's still not told us, I think, and I want to make sure that we know everything that we need to know before he leaves."

Sirius smiled at his friend, if only for a moment, before he looked at Bethany. "Take care of this old wolf, ok?"

Bethany squeezed her lover's hand and snuggled in a bit closer to him before she looked at the other Marauder. "You know I will, Siri."

"Ok then. Sleep well, both of you." With that, Sirius turned away and headed over to the Grangers, who were sitting next to Minerva McGonagall and Nymphadora Tonks. The young but 'retired' Auror offered him an open seat next to her, but he declined. "I'm going to bed, but I wanted to stop for a moment and let the two of you..." with

a wave, Sirius pointed at the two Grangers, "that Harry and his girls are upstairs and are not to be bothered tonight."

The way that the older ex-Auror leaned on the words 'not to be bothered' made the message loud and clear to the two Grangers. Miranda nodded immediately, as her memory of what had happened the last time she had gotten impatient was still fresh and she had no desire for a repeat...or for something worse to happen. Jake also nodded. He didn't like what he was being told between-the-lines, but he also knew that there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it, either. Like the song said....you don't tug on Superman's cape...you don't spit into the wind...you don't pull the mask off the old Lone Ranger and you don't mess around with Slim.

The master-suite of the European manor-house was large. Probably larger than most living rooms at 25' x 25', it had its own, attached, 'in-suite' double-bathroom (two toilets, an overly long bathtub, a four-person walk-in shower, and three separate, generous-sized sinks. The bed that dominated the back wall of the room was ridiculous large – a very plus-sized 'California king' (78 x 90") – that nicely accommodated Harry and this three girls each night.

The room was decorated in colors that reflected the consensus tastes of the girls, which was to say that it was done in scarlet and gold, mostly, with matching dark greens. It was a very peaceful room, all in all, and Harry loved it. The room was kept dark at night, so that they could get the best sleep possible, but had tall and broad windows that opened fully when weather permitted. Since the master-suite dominated the entire left-hand side of the second floor of the house, it had its own porch, which overlooked a very wide expanse of the St. Lawrence.

Trailing behind the others, Ginny took in the enormity of the room and the fact that everywhere she looked, the intimacy that Harry shared with the three girls was obvious. There were framed pictures of them on the walls, most all of which made it immediately obvious as to how Harry felt about his ladies. There was a more intimate indication of Harry's relationship with them on the floor in one corner: dirty clothes piled up together, without regard as to whether Harry's clothes were interspersed with those of his ladies. As she looked at it, Ginny wondered what the whole business was with the crazy elf that had latched onto Harry. If he was still working for Harry, then he was seriously falling down on the job.

Ginny didn't have much time to take in the rest of the room when she saw Hermione turn to face Harry and reach up to release the clasp which held his robe closed. The sight of Harry Potter, naked and erect, was enough to take her breath away. Youngest of the Weasleys and sister to six older brothers, Ginny was no stranger to male anatomy. She had seen quite enough of it as she grew up. She knew the various shapes and sizes with which boy-wizards (and young men) were gifted – based on their inner magical power - and so, had grown up with what she felt were 'normal' expectations. Harry shattered those expectations. He was ...perfect. Lean, perfectly chiseled in every important way, and confident in his power, Harry Potter was truly a god among men.

Then....oh yes...then she saw Hermione's robe hit the floor. Suddenly she knew what true jealousy felt like. Hermione was, she realized, the most beautiful girl alive.....and that was saying something, as Fleur Delacour and Hannah Abbott were suddenly also naked and standing next to Harry. Hermione though was everything that a witch should be: tall, lean, perfectly endowed, and radiating power the way that Harry did. She also had everything Ginny wanted: flawless skin, beautiful (what Harry called 'luscious') hair; big, vibrant eyes, and most importantly, Harry's total and complete love.

Not knowing what to expect, Ginny moved to a position that was half-way between where the door to the bathroom was and the enormous bed. Hermione, in turn, led Fleur, Hannah, and Harry over to the bed and silently bade them sit. Then she walked over to where Ginny stood and brought her to a position right in front of where Harry sat. So smoothly was it done that it felt to her (Ginny) as if the entire thing was choreographed – which, of course, it was.

Harry stood and smiled at her, before indicating the clasp on her robes. "May I?"

Ginny nodded. She didn't know what else to do. She knew it would feel weird to be the only one dressed in the room and she had a vague sense that something (other than sex) was about to happen, but she wasn't sure what it could be.

Sex. It was the thing that her mother had talked to her about so much when the two of them were alone. All sorts of advice that Molly

had given her over the years now rattled around in her head. Other voices, too, sounded in her thoughts, but they were quieter...more ethereal...but no less insistent. She wasn't afraid of what (she thought) was about to happen, but that didn't stop her from wondering, all the same.

Gently, Harry undid the white-gold, phoenix-shaped clasp just below her throat and the robe fluttered to the floor; leaving her naked and just a little aroused. For a moment, Harry's eyes met hers, before she looked down again. His eyes followed hers and took in, for the first time, the young but delicious body of Ginny Weasley.

Like the rest of the Weasleys, her skin was ivory and freckled all over and her hair was a deep, rich, intense red that tended to draw the eye towards her face. That was a good thing, too, because it let one see Ginny's intense blue eyes and sensuous, full lips, as well as her generally beautiful face.

At fourteen & 1/2, Ginny's body was very quickly ripening towards her 'adult' figure. Her breasts – now quite beautiful 34B's – were complimented by a flat stomach and generally trim figure; a figure highlighted by the fact that she was extremely tall for her age and genome, at close to 5'7. Not a single inch of her looked like it belonged on a 14 yr. old, but rather, on someone closer to 17 or 18. For all of that though, Harry regretted what he knew he had to do and he hoped that at the end, Ginny wouldn't hate him for it – as he knew she'd have every right to do.

"Well?" she asked, somewhat imperiously. It was a tone that she often took to cover over her nervousness or to disguise the fact that she was scared.

"You're beautiful, Ginny" he said, without hesitation. "Join us?" he asked, vaguely indicating the bed behind him.

Feeling a sense of relief, Ginny smiled and let herself be pulled onto the bed. Sex with Harry, even if his wives were present, would be a chance to snare him for herself, and she felt certain that once he had had her, he'd not want to let go.

Once she was next to Harry, she felt four sets of hands exploring her body. She couldn't tell who was touching her at any given

moment and she realized that it didn't matter. So long as Harry's was one of them, she was happy.

"Spread your legs", a voice whispered into her ear.

She did so and almost immediately felt someone touching and kissing his/her way around her pussy. It was a heavenly feeling!

"Let me do that" Harry said into Hermione's mind.

"You'll get your turn in a moment, sweetie. I'm having fun right now...and besides, she's delectable."

Harry smiled to himself as he shifted around behind Hermione, who was face-down between Ginny's pale thighs. He knew damn well that two could play the game that she had started. He stifled a giggle as Hermione pushed her magnificent ass in the air, so as to get more of her husband's intimate attentions and then let out a little sigh of pleasure as Harry's not-quite phallus-length tongue slithered deep into her wet sex. Not to be out-done, Fleur and Hannah took positions, almost at the end of the bed, on either side of Harry and began stroking his back. By silent, mutual agreement, the two quickly moved to more interesting areas of their husband's body and soon Harry felt four hands alternatively caressing/stroking/pleasuring his cock and sack and massaging his ass – which was something that he had discovered he really liked as well.

At five minutes of midnight, Hermione and Harry switched places; both knowing that in just a few minutes, Harry needed to be in Ginny, so that there was a good chance that he could bring her to orgasm as the grandfather clock struck its final chime. What they were planning on doing depended on the precise timing.

Fortunately for Harry, Hermione had primed the young girl quite sufficiently; leaving her on pretty much an orgasmic 'hair trigger'.

Moving up and over her, so that he was poised to push into her easily, Harry looked down at the pretty, albeit dangerous young girl, and smiled. "Do you want this as much as I do?" he asked softly.

Ginny could feel her excitement building. This was almost exactly what she and her mother had planned for – except for the presence of the other wives. "Please Harry! Make love to me!"

Harry leaned in and kissed her softly, even as he pushed into her sex. There was a small moment of resistance and he communicated that to Hermione silently, across their bond. It was something they had planned for and with which they were ready to cope.

The moment that he knew that Hermione was prepared, Harry pushed all the way into the youngest Weasley; tearing her hymen asunder and making her a woman. Harry thought, even as he began stroking into her, that if it hadn't been such a calculated, staged event, he might really have enjoyed it.

What Ginny didn't see or feel, because she was so distracted by Harry's earnest efforts at bringing her to climax, was Hermione's small, wandless summoning and the tiny glass vial that she held in her hand. Ginny never felt the small bit of virginal blood leave her body – which was exactly according to plan.

As the grandfather clock began striking midnight, Harry let his innate magic rise up, so that he could use it to caress Ginny all over. It was sad that what Harry found was that he was fairly magically compatible with the young witch beneath him and that his magic really did like hers. When Harry shared the discovery with Hermione, across their bond, Harry wasn't surprised to find that Hermione was sympathetic with the young girl and wished that things had been different between all of them.

"You ready?" Hermione asked him, almost rhetorically.

"As if you can't feel it, minx!"

"Make it happen, stud, and then you can take your other pleasure" Hermione replied, thinking about the other ways that the youngest Weasley was going to get used before the night was over.

As the clock struck its final chime, Harry did indeed feel Ginny's orgasm crash through her body and he joined her in it; sending his seed deep into her. Their love-making had exhausted her – which was also exactly as planned.

The moment that Harry saw Ginny's eyes close in the afterglow, he used his superior strength and position to pin her to the bed. She didn't notice the change in his attitude until it was too late. Wide-

eyed and slightly scared, she still tried to meet his stare bravely. In a rough, almost strangled voice, Harry said to her, "Ginevra Molly Weasley! I call your life-debt to me! Vos non existo venia!" ("You cannot be forgiven!") For your treachery, for your conspiracy to harm me and mine, I demand your service! Your body, soul, mind, and magic are MINE! You are Unnamed! So I say! SO MOTE IT BE!"

Even though she knew it was coming and had agreed with its necessity, Hannah still felt a still of sadness and horror at what had just been done. Ginny's magic....her very life....was now not her own to command or control. She was now Unnamed....a slave in body, mind, soul, and magic. She belonged to Harry, utterly, until he killed her or released her. She would be called 'slave' in public and called by her true, given name only when at home, and only ever if Harry permitted it.

She could not use magic, ever, unless given leave to do so by Harry and she was not permitted a wand, except in those same circumstances. Her life was magically sacrosanct, however, and anyone daring to hurt or kill her would suffer the very same fate as he/she had inflicted. That was the unique protection that the life-debt gave.

More than just a little sick at heart, Harry let her hands go and got up and off her, so that she could move freely again. She was no longer a threat. Any magic that had been worked upon her by her mother or by anyone else was effectively neutralized by his calling of her life-debt.

"Go look in the mirror, Ginny" Harry said to her, softly and sympathetically, as he pointed to the full-length, cherry-wood, Napoleonic-era mirror that stood in one corner of the room.

Unsteadily, Ginny rose from the bed naked and made her way over to the mirror. The first thing she saw was the black, almost trellis-like design of the magical tattoo that encircled her neck, wrists, and ankles. It was a pattern that existed only on the body of slaves. It was forbidden to reproduce it anywhere else...but everyone knew about it anyway. It was the kind of thing that people talked about after they had a couple of very stiff drinks in them.

"What have you done to me, Harry?" she said; trying to rage at him.

"You're..... you're my slave now, Ginny. You belong to me and to House Potter" he said, sadly.

"You! You.....I...." She tried to say "I hate you!", but her magic kept her from saying the words. It was as if someone had put a stopper in her anger. She could remember feeling angry; that she was sure of it, but she couldn't summon the feeling now. In fact, she couldn't summon any feelings, except for a desire to please Harry and to do and be what he wanted...and nothing more.

"Please come here" he asked, indicating the space on the bed next to him. She did so and quickly found herself face-down, with two pillows placed under her hips. She thought, wrongly, that he intended to spank her... and the thought didn't really bother her. Her mother had done much worse when Ginny had crossed her. "Spread your legs" he said as a gentle command, with no intention of frightening her. Again, she complied.

Once he kneeled behind her though, she began to be frightened. Boys usually got behind a girl for one of two reasons and since they had already 'made love'...well, that left one possibility. The moment that soft fingers started to probe her nether hole, she knew for a certainty what was coming. She fought the desire to please him with all that she had in her...but couldn't overcome the magic that made her want to comply.

Harry struggled, separately, to keep focused on what he had to do next. It wasn't as though he didn't like doing what he had to do next...but it was always with an extremely willing partner. That wasn't at all the case in this situation and he still felt strongly that it was wrong; the insistence of his three girls notwithstanding.

Hannah, always happy to get Harry worked up, reached over and took Harry 'in hand' and did what she could to make sure that he didn't wilt, before doing what had to be done. Leaning close, she whispered in his ear, "Once you're done with this business, I fully expect you to do me. She might not love your cock, but I do!"

No matter how bothered Harry was by the fact that he had to completely dominate and use Ginny's body this night, he couldn't help but smile happily at Hannah's wonderfully lewd request.

Moving around, Harry positioned himself so that he could do what had to be done. After appreciating her long, wonderful nakedness, he moved in close and Ginny felt the warmth of Harry's body against hers, even as the tip of Harry's slick cock pressed insistently against her back door. She whimpered and struggled against the magic which was controlling her with everything she had, to protest the invasion of her body, even as another part of her wanted to push back against him and help him enjoy every moment of it. Her new-found desire to please him won out, after a small, but fairly one-sided war, as the magic Harry had invoked would tolerate any other outcome, and she pushed herself slightly upwards and backwards onto his huge, pulsating, fleshy spike – and in so doing, helped Harry get past the enormous hesitation that he was feeling about the whole situation.

For the next twenty minutes, the other girls watched, with ever-growing desire and hands caressing wet pussies, as Harry took the red-headed beauty's hips and perfect ass in his hands and sodomized her.

When the time was right, Harry held Ginny still and turned his attention to his most beloved wife. "Ready?"

Nodding, she handed him a very finely haired brush and the vial of dark red blood that they had rescued only minutes before. "You've practiced this, Harry. Those runes on her back have to go. Only you can remove them."

Harry held himself deep in the girls' bottom as he leaned forward and painted two, special runes on top of the ones that covered her upper back. As he did so, the old ones started to smoke and wither away as the power of the two new ones took hold.

When the runes were finished, Harry knew immediately that Hermione's and Fleur's plan had worked. He could feel the malignant bindings on Ginny's magic fall away and the 'old' Ginny Weasley; fabulous, latent magical power and all, return. It was for him, if not exactly a happy moment, at least a satisfying one.

Looking down at the broad expanse of the beautiful girls' back and the slight, sexy swaying of her breasts, Harry felt himself return to full hardness and he plunged into her with more enthusiasm. Minutes went by as their bodies slapped together and then, for as

slowly as he had started, Ginny came; screaming "Harry!" and then, less clearly but no less intensely, "So, so good....". That was enough. Harry came with an inarticulate yell and filled the red-head's bottom with his abundant seed, before falling exhausted by her side.

As he lay stretched out, Hermione silently and wandlessly cleaned each of them and then leaned in close to kiss him hard. Always the most aggressive and most confident of the three whispered to him across their bond, "Well, she sure as hell liked that."

"Yea, she did, didn't she?" he replied with a surprised but satisfied/amused tone.

"Doesn't matter either way though, does it?" Hermione asked, rhetorically.

"No, it doesn't." He started. "I thought she'd fight it more, but I guess we were wrong about how strong the bindings were. They were far stronger than we surmised. She couldn't fight the enslavement because she was being overwhelmed by the runes. Whatever else Molly was, she was definitely a Runes-Mistress."

Harry could feel Hermione conceding the point, while thinking about her own needs. "I'm next, Harry, so you better have something left!"

"Cheeky minx. Of course I do! You know I took the potion as we came up."

"Just checking, love! I wanted to make sure that my sisters and I aren't left out of the fun."

Reaching over to touch her, Harry caressed her in very personal ways, to let her know that she'd never be left out of the fun. That didn't stop his mind from whirling about in thought, though. Among other things, he knew that he had just had sex with Ginny (because he was quite sure that what they had just done had been without real consent, and therefore NOT in any way 'making love') for the first and last time...and he found himself unsure of whether he was disappointed or not. For that was part of the promise, both to himself and to his wives, that he had made when he had proposed the simple, but brutal solution to the problem that was Ginny Weasley. He would never again touch her sexually, for as long as she was his responsibility, even if both he and she wanted it, and in exchange,

the girls would let her live and let her stay with them. Harry didn't know how hard it would be for everyone to uphold the agreement, but for Arthur's sake and for the sake of the Weasley twins who loved their sister, he would do his part.

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Three hours before dawn - November 1, 1995 – in the square in front of the Jewel House at the Tower of London

There was nothing like appearing silently, ready to attack, where and when your enemies don't expect you, to get the blood going. It had been so long since he had faced a worthy foe he thought...and corrected himself....since the Potter-brat...and he longed to test himself against someone who could bring the true fire of combat against him. Not that there was anyone strong enough, smart enough, or skilled enough to face him, he knew...but still! There had to be someone against whom he could test himself! Then he realized that there was...but only one...and the old man lacked the spirit to really challenge him. If you're not willing to kill, your heart's not truly in the game – and Albus Dumbledore wasn't willing to kill – at least not anymore. The 'leader of the light' had always maintained that he had done quite enough killing before defeating Gellert Grindelwald and that he would not kill again. "Another soft-hearted fool" the Dark Lord thought, as he quietly observed his forces appearing around him, in a series of timed apparitions.

Once he counted the twenty heads, he brought them all around him and spoke quickly and more quietly than most would have expected. "You have your orders. Do not fail me and do not get creative. We are here to accomplish a goal and to leave the Muggles smarting. Alastair has given us the complete layout of the building. Let us get in, take the Muggle-Queens precious jewels, and then get out. DO NOT get yourselves caught! The Muggles do not seem to be so forgiving or cowardly as they once were. We are too few in number now and cannot afford more losses. REMEMBER THAT! This mission has been three weeks in the planning. We cannot let that go to waste. If you truly serve me in your hearts, you will not forget this! Now – let us go and be victorious!"

A small, very quietly voiced cheer went up from the men, before they descended into silence and broke into their assigned groups. He was pleased to see that the four that he had chosen as his personal

guard seemed to be particularly attentive to their duties. As they moved across the square and towards the front doors, he noticed that they were moving as one, coordinated body, instead of separate individuals and he felt his spirits start rise.

As the first group got to the front door, one cast a Lumos charm and the others looked inside. Suddenly, they all disappeared, and then re-appeared inside the large hallway. Just according to plan, the first group disabled the Muggle security-net and then signaled for the rest to join them. The next two groups did exactly as the first and soon, all twenty of them, including Riddle himself, were inside.

Pointing to the three team-leaders, Riddle motioned for them to divide the teams and ascend the stair-cases that led to the main jewel room.

The three teams had just made it to the second floor landing when a guard, attracted by the noise on the stairs, suddenly appeared out of nowhere. He saw the twelve men and did exactly as his training had taught him to do: he went for his HK P30L (40 S & W) 10mm. He got off four deadly shots – two each into the two men directly in front of him - before a killing-curse struck him down. It could not have been worse luck, because the noise from the shots rang throughout the building and could not be 'called back'. Riddle knew immediately that they were on borrowed time and sent the rest of his men towards the massive, steel-reinforced doors that blocked the entrance to the main jewel room. With two flicks of his wand, the doors disappeared and a neat entrance appeared right into the room.

Knowing that each team had a specific job to do, the Dark Lord sent them inside. As the last man passed him, he said "I will guard the door. Get the jewels and leave."

"Yes.....YES MY LORD!" he said; amazed that that his lord would take on such a task. It wasn't in the dark lord's character....and then the man realized that he was wrong; smiled, and then promised himself that he would not let his lord down for anything. They would get the jewels or die trying.

There were several more gunshots from the hallway, even as the last of the jewel cases was broken open and its contents removed. There wasn't a hope of getting past the dark lord's shields, but the officers shooting at him didn't know that and they sent volley after

volley of high-velocity 7.62mm rounds at him from the L85A1 assault rifles they carried. Getting annoyed, the Dark Lord began striking them down with various curses; seeing how inventive he could be as he did so. There was no point to limiting his spell-choices, given that the soldiers weren't much better than practice-dummies for him.

What he didn't expect was to feel a sudden burst of magic from twenty meters away. Turning to see what the new presence was, he suddenly felt himself slammed backwards against the door-frame by an amazingly powerful Reductor curse.

"Surrender and throw down your wand, Riddle! We've had enough of you tonight. Your time is finished!"

Out of the darkness and over the bodies of the fallen soldiers stepped a tall, handsome black man, his wand pointed right at the dark lord. "I won't say it again. Surrender or die."

Staggering a little bit from the impact of the curse before straightening up, he said "I don't know you, but I think you misunderstand your position in the world, wizard, if you think you can destroy me. I am the defeater of death itself. You can not possibly hope to beat me." He put as much menace into his voice as possible, hoping to buy time for his men by scaring the wizard off.

Taking another step forward, the black man actually laughed. "Oh stuff it, Tom. You don't scare me. You were beaten by a fourteen year-old in June. You hold no terror for me."

It was the dark lord's turn to laugh. A raspy, sickly sound to be sure, but a laugh non-the-less. "Ah yes....Potter. Well, you seem to misunderstand him, too. You see, he's the only one who's offered me sport since I was a very young man. Potter is worth any five wizards I've ever met, even if he's an insolent brat."

A voice from behind the Dark Lord said, in a hurried whisper, "We have it all, Master! It's time to go!" The Dark Lord didn't immediately acknowledge the man behind him. It wasn't the right time.

"Well, I would stay to chat, but I have places to go and trinkets to inspect." With that, he tried to disapparate and found that he couldn't. It was like he was somehow glued down. The man behind him – the one shielded from view by the way the entrance was configured -

saw his master's distress, grabbed him non too gently, and triggered the emergency port-key that he had been taught to carry.

The last thing that Kingsley Shacklebolt saw of the Dark Lord was the extremely disturbing vision of him smiling...and he knew, without a doubt, that it didn't portend good things for him or for those he served.

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter Thirteen – "A House Divided"

By the_scribbler

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

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From Chapter Twelve – "A Weasley's Sacrifice"

...It was the dark lord's turn to laugh. A raspy, sickly sound to be sure, but a laugh none-the-less. "Ah yes....Potter. Well, you seem to misunderstand him, too. You see, he's the only one who's offered me sport since I was a very young man. Potter is worth any five wizards I've ever met, even if he's an insolent brat."

A voice from behind the Dark Lord said, in a hurried whisper, "We have it all, Master! It's time to go!" The Dark Lord didn't immediately acknowledge the man behind him. It wasn't the right time.

"Well, I would stay to chat, but I have places to go and trinkets to inspect." With that, he tried to disappear and found that he couldn't. It was like he was somehow glued down. The man behind him – the one shielded from view by the way the entrance was configured – saw his master's distress, grabbed him none too gently, and triggered the emergency port-key that he had been taught to carry.

The last thing that Kingsley Shacklebolt saw of the Dark Lord was the extremely disturbing vision of him smiling...and he knew, without a doubt, that it didn't portend good things for him or for those he served.

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In the twilight of dawn, November 1, 1995 – Prime Minister's Office – 10 Downing Street, London, UK

The thing that frightened John Major the most was not economic collapse; for that came and went, at least once every other generation, and could be dealt with. Nor did he really fear plague (any kind of plague), for those tended to burn themselves out, if you quarantined the victims quickly enough. No, what John Major feared was civil war. The prospect of brother-on-brother violence, as had wracked England in the past and the United States, not so very long ago, was the thing that gripped his heart with true fear. Perhaps it was the fact that his own family had been so tight-knit that he couldn't imagine taking up arms in anger against any of them. He just didn't know. All he did know for sure was that he'd do anything to prevent it.

He wasn't more than a couple of months into his prime-ministership and suddenly, he was facing the very real possibility that his entire nation was soon going to be in the throws of the most awful catastrophe that happen to any nation.

The cabinet was fully assembled and there were a great many very grim faces. All of them had taken to studying Shacklebolt and trying to discern for themselves whether or not they ought to measure British magical society by his actions. Though he was not an

accomplished Legilimens, he could read that plainly enough on their faces.

Once they had all been briefed on the theft of the crown jewels, Kingsley told them about what they were facing.

"You have all read" he said, "about Tom Marvolo Riddle, aka 'Lord Voldemort', born 31 December, 1926. As your documents say, he is the quintessential madman. I think your reports call him" and he looked at the one sheet of scribbled notes in his hand carefully before reading aloud the words, "a 'monomaniacal, homicidal sociopath'. He is fixated on eluding death and as you have read, he has done so successfully. He should have died on October 31, 1981 – the night he attacked Harry James Potter – but he didn't – and now he is back and is seeking to take over all of England, continental Europe, and maybe even the rest of the world. As far as we can tell, he cannot be permanently killed, except by the one person who banished him fifteen years ago."

"So you're saying that we're in a war against an immortal enemy and the one person – this Harry Potter you've referred to, the one who could save us, has run away? Is that it?"

Kingsley thought about that a good while before responding. "'Yes, I am. For your purposes, he is immortal until or unless Harry Potter returns to the Kingdom and destroys him. By prophecy, He's the only one who can. However, I am saying that it is also true that this government is not without resources and that those resources can be used to destroy Riddle's followers and his bases of operation. If you take away those things, then the problem is reduced to setting the stage for a final confrontation between Mr. Potter and Tom Riddle."

"How is that even possible?" asked the Chief of the General Staff - General Sir Charles Guthrie (by right and tradition, the Baron Guthrie of Craigiebank); referring to Riddle's supposed immortality.

Shacklebolt turned to the multiply-decorated officer and said, "Well – if you mean by your question, 'how has he eluded death' – then my answer is that you'd have to ask Dumbledore himself. I have some strong guesses, but no facts to back them up. I can tell you though...and I cannot stress strongly enough that what I am about to say must never leave this room..." There were nods of agreement all

around, as people sat up straighter. "Wizards know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the human soul is very much real and that Tom Riddle has found a way to protect and preserve his."

The general (for that is what Kingsley had heard the others call him) nodded and then leaned over to whisper something to his aide-d-camp.

The bombshell that Kingsley had just dropped was still resonating around the room, as those present tried to take in the significance of what they had just been told. It would take many days before it truly sank in, and even then, not one of them would be able to really appreciate the astonishing information that they had been given.

"Where is this Harry Potter now?" Another voice asked. It was one of the Prime Minister's personal assistants.

"We don't know, for certain. Albus Dumbledore believes, and I think rightly, that Harry has fled England and Europe. We have reason to believe that he's gone either east or west and not south. For my part, I think he's gone west – to the States – but I can't prove it."

"Has anyone been sent to look for him?" a voice wondered out loud.

Shacklebolt shook his head. "No. Not that we've not thought about it, but we just don't have the man-power to spare." Kingsley didn't know about Albus' errand-boy and the task that he had been given. "Besides which, the fact is that Harry's well and truly disappeared. If any of us once knew where he was, we don't know now. That tells me that Harry pulled the same disappearing trick that his parents did; only this time, he made himself secret-keeper. He obviously does not want to be found."

"You mean he's somehow magically hidden himself?" the Prime Minister asked quietly.

"Yes. That's exactly what I mean. He's used magic to hide his location from the world. No one who has not been told the secret by him, can know where he is. Even if they see him every day - they can't and don't remember his location from one minute to the next. It's a very effective way of hiding."

"Can we find him?" It was one of the MI-5 types asking the question. Shacklebolt didn't immediately remember the man's name.

"No. If Harry's gone to ground, the magic he's invoked will hide him, even against the best non-magical means of finding people."

"What about finding someone who's known as one of his friends?"

Kingsley thought about that for a moment. "You could try, I suppose. I don't guarantee that you'll have much success though. The Fidelius charm is hard to cast, but if Harry's done what I think he's done, then there are more than a dozen people with him who are all very capable of casting it and they'd have no compunction against doing so, in order to protect Harry. Overlapping Fidelius charms would be as tough a magical barrier to get through as anything I can imagine."

"Wouldn't hurt to try, though" another pointed out. There were nods at this point and several people made notes to themselves to follow up on the idea.

"What about posting something in the daily papers?"

Shacklebolt shook his head. "If you did, Harry would never respond. Remember that A) as an untrained and inexperienced wizard, he has every reason to fear Tom Riddle and therefore he'd do nothing to help Riddle's forces find him and B) there's no incentive for Harry to return to England right now. Everyone he cares about is either with him or is otherwise already safe."

A young brunette girl, whose wild, almost untamed brown hair reminded Kingsley of a more grown-up version of Harry's friend Hermione Granger asked, in a very condescending tone-of-voice, what he none-the-less thought was a very salient question: "What can we do between now and whenever Mr. Potter decides to grace us with his presence again?"

He hesitated for a moment and then continued on. "Remember what I said about Mr. Potter being the only able to destroy Riddle? Well, keeping that in mind, what I should have said as a follow-up to that there are significant limitations upon what Riddle and his followers can do. They cannot kill from miles away, nor can they destroy entire cities. They cannot, in short, cause the kind of damage that will bring down this country. Yes, they can execute terrorist-type

raids, like the one that we saw last night, but they don't have the man-power and they don't have the magical power to bring down this government or cause wide-spread destruction.

In fact, with the exception of Riddle himself, and a few who were with him when he first became a threat, there aren't that many who can't be beaten, captured, or killed. We – those who are still loyal to magical England and to our queen - have organized some two hundred fighters and each one of them is willing to do his or her part in this fight. They will be made available to you in due course. They, along with some of the forces that are being assembled by your side, can do much to contain and then eliminate Riddle as a significant threat."

"But what if we can't stop him? What if you're wrong?" said a young woman to the brunette's left.

"We will cross that bridge when we come to it. I have reason to believe that Harry will return, however, when the time is right. I knew his father James very well and if the son is anything like the father, he won't abandon us in our time of need."

"In the mean time, though, we have a great deal to accomplish" the Prime Minister said, more loudly, so that everyone understood that he had taken back control of the meeting.

For the next two hours, ideas were floated and (for the most part) shot down, and a consensus began to form regarding the course that they would take. When it broke up; just after 10 am GMT, Kingsley hoped that someone had thought enough to have a set of fake crown jewels on hand, so that the populace didn't immediately discover the theft and try to bring down the government. He also hoped that his own side – that of the 'legitimate' magical government – didn't react badly to all that had been said and done in the meeting.

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The Horse and Groom Pub, Epsom Road, Gilford, UK – just after dark; Friday, November 3, 1995

Albus Dumbledore's nose wrinkled in acute irritation as he stepped through the door of the Horse and Groom. The last time he had been here, his bastard brother had stripped him of one of his best

wands and thrown the other into the bushes outside the pub; making him search for it for several cold and infuriating hours. The memory rankled and he made a promise to himself that there would be a reckoning between the two of them at some point.

The pervasive smell of spilled, rancid beer hit him as he made his way through the portico of the pub and towards the back, where 'his people' were waiting. It was a typical Muggle establishment – which meant that there were TV's in a number of spots; loud sports matches blaring from each set.

Like most 'traditional' wizards, Albus Dumbledore had never understood the fascination with such things. His belief was that if you couldn't be at the match – live – then you missed it and it was just too bad. The Omnioculars, with the 'live play-back' feature were, admittedly, kind of interesting...but he was a man that preferred to participate in the live action and there was precious little that could change his mind on the matter.

The crunch of carelessly discarded peanut shells and crisps was noisy as he entered and the smell of cigarette smoke assaulted his senses. "How do they propose to actually taste their food with that in the air?" he thought as he approached the too-small group towards the back of the pub. Passing a hastily scribbled sign that proclaimed that both the pickled eggs and the fish-and-chips were on special, the aged (former?) headmaster crossed the floor and took a seat to the right of the tall, powerfully-built black man and the short, balding, non-descript man with the receding hair-line and port-wine stain on his forehead. Across from them sat Reginald Cattermole, Elphias Dodge, Alastor "Mad Eye" Moody, Tiberius Ogden, and his eldest son, Phinius. At the far end of the table, with his back against the wall, sat Hephaestus Perkins.

There was a not-so-subtle nod from the former Auror to the group and at once, they laid their hands on the table, with their now-visible rings. Each ring had the ornately carved symbol of a Phoenix on it and each ring was now glowing; indicating that they were once again unified. Dumbledore spoke. "We gather again; we few who oppose the darkness, and we pledge ourselves to the light."

"So I swear" each intoned. A small burst of blue-white light surrounded their rings and once again proved that they had remained true to the light.

As each of them looked around and counted those missing, the losses became obvious, as well as painful. Molly Weasley was dead - which they knew for a fact, as her ring had returned to Albus upon her death, as it was charmed to do, to Albus and her husband, Arthur Weasley, was missing. The Weasley children were dead (Percy) or missing. The others - Ron, Ginny, Fred, George, Bill, and Charlie, were all missing. Gone too were Nymphadora, Andromeda, and Ted Tonks (missing but alive), Minerva McGonagall (missing but alive), Phinius Flitwick (missing but alive), Severus Snape (missing but presumed dead), Remus Lupin (missing but alive), Sirius Black (missing but alive), Emmeline Vance (missing but alive), and Dedalus Diggle – dead. Mundungus Fletcher was also dead. He had been killed by Emmeline Vance, when the drunkard had tried to rape her after a particularly rancorous Order meeting. He wouldn't be missed or mourned. Rubeus Hagrid was also missing, but had stayed in communication via Patronus message. He was living in the mountains, somewhere in Central Europe, working with his full-giant brother, Grawp, to try to recruit more giants to their cause. It was slow-going, but worth the effort if successful.

Kingsley Shacklebolt watched as each ring signaled that his owner had, in fact, stayed true to 'their' side. "I have news and I don't think any of you are going to like it."

This statement caused several of the Order-members to shake heads, as it had quickly become known that Kingsley had actually attacked Voldemort and lived to tell about it. "Can't be any worse than losing the jewels" Elphias Dodge said.

"It is. Not one of you is going to like what I'm about to show you." With that, he extracted a memory and placed it in a small urn that sat in the middle of the table. The memory sprang to life, much like a 3D movie. They watched, in growing horror, as the emergency meeting of the Prime Minister's cabinet played on.

When it was done, the group sat back hard; almost slumping in their chairs with distress. It was clear to each of them that things had gone from bad to worse. The breath and depth of the information now held by the Muggles about the magical world was frightening and it didn't appear that there was any end in sight. The Muggles would continue to gather information about them and there was very

little they could do about it. Trying to do so would be like trying to hold back the ocean when it was time for the tide to come in.

Steepling his fingers, Albus Dumbledore looked at the assembled Order-members and then said gravely, "It is clear that time grows short and the confluence of forces does not bode well for the continued secrecy of our world. Unless we act, our existence – our way of life – will become so compromised that we will no longer be able to govern ourselves or rebuild the lives we once knew."

His declaration was decidedly not news to those at the table and Kingsley could tell, by the expressions on several faces, that there was the hope that Dumbledore might say something that they could actually use. Platitudes would get them nowhere.

"No world on Harry?" Phinius Ogden said, vainly searching for some morsel of hope.

"None. He's definitely alive, but where....I cannot say. It appears that he, or someone with him, has indeed cast a Fidelius charm. Kingsley – I do wish you had not shared that bit with the PM and his people. The more they know, the more able they are to act against us were it to come to that."

"What of the ICW?" Reginald "Reggie" Cattermole asked. "Surely other countries would be willing to help us in our time of need."

Shaking his head sadly, Dumbledore said, "At the personal request of the PM, I have approached the ICW. Twice. I have sent Fawkes to the ICW council, asking for the convening of a formal meeting, so that we could plead our case to them and twice he has returned bearing nothing more than a terse message, reminding me that the next scheduled meeting isn't until January 2nd and I have been unable to convince my fellow council-members to change their minds on that point. It seems that my influence isn't what it once was."

It wasn't welcome news. Dumbledore had always been an asset to their cause for the very fact of his membership (and even leadership of) the ICW and the Wizengamot. The complete disintegration of the English magical government had made the ICW suddenly that much more important to their very survival... so its collective refusal to come back into session worried everyone at the table a great deal.

"There's nay much that can be done, Albus, if the ICW doesn't want to meet. I'd say we're on our own from here on out, unless you have some miracle up your sleeve about which you've not bothered to tell the rest of us."

He looked over at the now-retired master Auror and shook his head sadly. "I don't, I'm afraid."

Those four words sank what little good feeling any of the Order-members might have harbored and the meeting broke up on a very somber note.

As the other Order-members made their way out of the pub, Kingsley waited outside the front door, in the hope that he could catch a moment with his former Headmaster.

When, at last, Dumbledore exited the Pub, Kingsley quickly pulled him aside. They weren't even around the corner of the building when he began to speak. "I don't know what you're playing at Albus, but if there's another meeting like this, the Order won't survive. They've got to have some hope....or even just a direction in which to march. You're supposed to be our leader and all you've done is drive down everyone's spirits."

"This wasn't supposed to be my job, Kingsley. Harry was supposed to have taken Riddle down by now." He didn't say, because it was something he had never told anyone, that Harry was supposed to die in the struggle against Riddle. That Harry had chosen to 'slip his leash' and run away with all those that he had seemed to gather to him, boded ill for Albus' ability to steer the fated boy towards his untimely end. A powerful Harry Potter was a threat – the one, supreme existential threat – to the ability of the old-line families to control magical society in England, as was their god-given right.

Kingsley, for his part, looked unconvinced. "You're the adult, Albus. You're the most powerful of us all. Seems to me that you're trying to make a boy do a man's job."

Albus felt the anger rise in him and struggled to contain it. He still needed Kingsley – and would for a while yet, anyway, and couldn't afford to have him 'do a runner' too.

Albus struggled vainly for some platitude – some piece of supposed 'wisdom' that he could offer the tall, powerful (ex) Auror, but he kept coming up empty. Finally he said, "Gather your best fighters then, and let us see then just what we can do to give our people something to fight for."

Kingsley nodded. "That I can do. Any specific targets in mind?"

"A few" he said, smiling, before almost silently disappearing; leaving the (ex) Auror to stare at the now star-filled sky.

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Just off Rue de Castillon, Toulon, France – Sunday, November 12, 1995

Ronald Weasley had just gotten his hand slapped for the third time. The next time, he was warned, the punishment for failure would be considerably worse.

"God damn miserable, fucking French. You'd think there wouldn't be that many different kinds of knives, forks, and spoons!"

Madame Élodie Hougot was, if anything, worse than his master, Robert. For almost a week, she had been setting before him more than a dozen dinning utensils, in order to teach him how and when to use them. The most recent challenge was to put them on either side of the plate, in their proper order, and he had no more than two minutes in which to complete the exercise.. His last attempt had been correct, he had thought, but the hand-slap had said otherwise.

Working feverishly, Ron placed all of the items that he knew and then went back to try to figure out where the four remaining pieces went. The clock was against him and he could feel the sweat break out on the back of his neck as it ticked towards zero.

With two seconds to spare, Ron set the last piece in place and then stepped back to await Mme. Hougot's verdict. It didn't take long.

"Very good, Ronald. I thought for sure that you would be polishing all of the silver-set today, but you've surprised me. We may make a human of you yet."

"Before or after I kill you?" Ron thought to himself, but didn't respond aloud to her commentary. She was a miserable, loathsome individual – if only because her cloying overused Lily perfume made him want to bend over and vomit in one of the larger potted plants that lined the large, formal dining room.

With a flick of her wand, the various silver utensils were cleaned and with another flick, they quickly packed themselves away; each to its own blue-velvet storage bag.

"Now that we have completed that exercise, we can move on. Your master has asked me to teach you the finer points of 'high tea'." She laughed and then said, "I expect that you will, in fact, be polishing the silver service after this lesson."

Ron grimaced and bit his tongue. Robert the Fierce was no one whom you'd want to annoy and, to his continuing frustration, Ron found that he annoyed his master a very great deal of the time and doing so on a Sunday afternoon was the very, very last thing that he wished to do. It was Robert's 'day off'...even if it wasn't Ron's...and being pulled away from it was, according to Robert's rules for him, tantamount to having committed capital murder, or some such thing.

The galling thing was that whole, miserable situation had come about as a consequence of his master's effort to reward him for having learned, without complaint, a complicated series of curses, counter-curses, and charms, in the days after he, Robert, had returned from his mysterious meeting. They had, as a treat, gone into one of the small villages, Boschplaat, on the largest of the barrier islands in the Oosterend-Terschelling-Friesland chain, along the far western coast of Denmark. While the restaurant itself wasn't particularly fancy, it was warm, welcoming, and smelled like heaven itself to Ron.

Having seated themselves, Robert ordered a coffee for himself and a cup of tea for Ron. Once he, and not Ron, had looked over the menu, the young (and extremely pretty) girl who was serving them took his order for two plates of Frikadeller (fried meatballs) along with some warm brown bread and an order of seafood pate (with toast points) as an appetizer. It was traditional faire, but both filling and good, if done properly.

The trouble began when the appetizer was served. Diving into the pate, Ron slathered a massive slab of it onto one of the toast points and attempted to cram the entire thing into his mouth, without even so much as a 'by-your-leave' from his master. Horrified at his protégé's behavior, Robert could do naught but sit and watch for a moment.

Finally, when the last bits of food from the first bite had disappeared, Robert stood and ordered Ron to do the same. Turning, Robert asked their waitress where the men's room was. She pointed towards a door in the back of the establishment and then turned away to hide the giggle that was about to burst forth. She knew, just by watching his expression that Robert was going to 'have words' with the lanky, almost gangly red-haired youth.

Once they were safely behind a locked door, Robert took out his wand and appraised him. "I have neither the time nor the patience to try to punish you here for what you've just done, so I'm going to put it off for a while. We'll talk again when I am ready to do so."

With a flick of his wand, Ron was transfigured into a door-mouse. One stupefy later and the unconscious Ron resided in his master's pocket.

Robert left the men's room and returned to the table, as if nothing had happened. It didn't occur to him to try to explain to his waitress the sudden absence of the gangly teenager who had been with him just moments before. However, when the meal was done and the empty dishes were cleared away (for Robert's appetite was considerable, once he no longer had to witness his protégé's atrocious table-manners), the magically-charmed tip that was left with the check was more than sufficient to make the young woman forget that anything had been amiss before, during, or after the meal.

Two days past before Ron was released from his mousy imprisonment. It was the longest period he had ever gone without eating and he was sick with hunger when he finally found himself human again.

Robert looked his protégé and said, in a flat, serious tone, "You have not eaten for more than forty-eight hours. Sit. Eat. Use a fork. One bite at a time, slowly. Dinning is not a timed sport." The hand on Ron's shoulder brooked no argument. The meal that was set before

him was simple: plain, boiled potatoes, steamed carrots, pan-fried fish, and sliced tomatoes in vinegar.

Ron sat and started to eat. The fork felt almost foreign in his hand. He almost never used anything but his hands when he was eating! He started with the fish, as that was the easiest (and most appetizing) thing on the plate. It was warm! Someone had used just the right amount of butter and salt...and the slight crust on it was incredibly crunchy. Ron was in heaven.

When the fish was all gone, he tried to decide what to eat next. He was still really hungry. It took a tremendous amount of willpower to resist the urge to eat the potatoes in two or three bites, as he might have done at home, and it took even more willpower not to acknowledge the sudden rush of pain and sadness that sprang up at the thought of his family.

"Stop. Push away from the table. Close your eyes and take a deep breath." Ron did so; not knowing what to expect. His master's voice was suddenly much, much softer and kinder than he had heard it before. "I didn't know, Ron. I'm sorry. You've not had time to grieve. Your father didn't say anything...."

While he was not an Auror-class Legilimens, he still had sufficient skill to get past what natural defenses Ron had and now he did so, in order to help his protégé begin to cope with the sadness that he had been repressing.

Such sadness had to be dealt with and sooner was better than later. He knew, as Yoda had taught, that 'Fear (and sadness) is the path to the dark side. Sadness leads to anger. Anger leads to hate and Hate...leads to suffering.' He also knew that Ron had to find a way to purge the sadness that he was feeling and to deal with the memories that he had, both the good and the bad, so that he could move on and become the man that his father hoped he could be.

It surprised the older man that he could have developed such concern for the gangly teenager, but there it was. "Did Minerva have to deal with this kind of thing?" he wondered. "Probably" was the answer that he found most likely.

An hour or so later, Ron returned to the meal that waited for him on the table. He had cried himself out and now wanted nothing more

than to eat and go to bed. There was a great deal to think about and he knew that solitude was what he needed most.

From across the room, Robert watched him eat. A small smile creased his face as he saw that Ron had taken the earlier lesson to heart and was eating slowly; one bite at a time. It was a start.

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Tuesday, November 21, 1995, around half-one in the afternoon;
DADA, L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec

Isabelle Gattineau paced around the room, watching her students practicing the traditional opening moves for a formal, magical duel. That is, those who weren't clustered around Harry and Hermione Potter. They were doing something altogether different.

She leaned against one of the 'white' boards that all of the teachers had taken to using, in favor of the much dirtier and harder-to-use forest-green chalk-boards, and watched as both Harry and Hermione used a combination of disillusionment, disapparation, and advanced transfigurations to overcome their opponents. What they were doing was so far ahead of what she was trying to teach the rest of the class that she was sure that they could both sit for their end-of-year exams for each of the next several years of DADA and pass them with flying colors. That was, if she was competent to test them at all. Reaching up, she rubbed her right shoulder for a moment, where the lingering pain of her loss to Lord Potter resided. Wincing, she thought back to that moment, where in her haste and desire to win, she had made the mistake of trying to distract or anger her opponent without thought as to what might happen in reaction to her 'inspired' tactic.

Slowly, the students who were supposed to be practicing the first seven steps of the traditional dueling method stopped and wandered into positions from which they could watch what Harry and Hermione were teaching.

Neville, Lord Longbottom, was currently holding forth with his own set of unusual and sneaky techniques while his three wives watched, appreciatively. He used a combination of transfigurations, conjurations, and charms to trap his opponent – in this case Seamus Finnegan – in an overly large ceramic pot and bind him there with

fast-growing ivy vines that looked like menacing brown ropes with minds of their own. Seamus was very quickly subdued and when it was over, the group of twelve or so applauded the two combatants.

"Very good, Neville" she said. She stubbornly refused to call him by his English title of 'Lord Longbottom' – which caused Susan, Padma, and Parvati to mentally chafe with irritation. "I would not have expected such a use of growing charms in a combat situation, but that was well done." And indeed it was, Isabelle thought, but that wasn't the reason for saying it. She had to rest back control of the class somehow and talking her way into the middle of the 'class-within-a-class' was the only way she could think of in the moment.

Spinning in a slow circle, she looked at all of the faces assembled. Except for the diminutive, red-haired girl who was standing off to one side – the one whom she had been quietly and explicitly warned by the Headmistress herself not to address or even acknowledge – she saw polite attention; barely-feigned interest, and all of the possible expressions in-between.

"Now, since this group seems intent on rushing ahead with things I've not taught yet, perhaps you could divided yourselves into two groups of six, and then set pairs for another round of duels – but this time against the rest of your classmates. I should like to see what else you're doing, about which I should also know."

There were two girls, a tall, incredibly beautiful, golden-yellow haired beauty, and a slightly shorter, not-quite-dirty-blonde who's looks were equally incredible, who were watching her...but were also watching Harry's reactions. Isabelle noticed that the two girls were edging closer to Lady Potter (whom she always referred to that way, either aloud or in the privacy of her own thoughts, given that her husband had saved her life) and that she was moving closer to them. It also didn't take a genius, based on the way that Potter was moving towards them, to see that there was something beyond simple friendship going between him, Lady Potter, and the two stunning-looking blondes.

With a couple of quiet hand-signals, Harry and Neville moved their wives off, so that they'd be matched, individually, against opponents they knew and could defeat easily, while at the same time setting themselves as a dueling pair. It wasn't fair, nor was it entirely ethical - given the sheer number of hours that the two had practiced

together – but it would allow them to hide their real capabilities while putting on a really good show.

Hermione and Susan understood what was being asked of them and so moved to talking and occasionally laughing quietly together, while pointing at the Weasley twins. Neville grinned at Harry and he returned the sentiment. It was going to be fun to watch those matches play out.

Meanwhile, Padma, her sister Parvati, Hannah, and Fleur got together for a discussion in the room's only unoccupied corner, and had a quick discussion about their own strategies and potential partners. Not wanting to be outdone, Cho Chang, Seamus Finnegan, Katie Bell, and Alicia Spinnet grabbed the unoccupied desk at the back of the room, near where Ginny stood, and had a conversation about their own favored tactics. Ginny's presence went unremarked.

Clearing away the remaining desks, so that the entire room was transformed into a dueling arena, Isabelle watched as the pairs began to queue up for their turns. She promised herself that she'd not interfere unless there was risk of serious injury and then the voice in her head laughed bitterly. 'Who's going to save your sorry ass if you do something dumb, like the last time?'

It wasn't the first time that the voice in her head chastised her, but the words were particularly harsh this time. She didn't know if that was because she was watching a potentially similar scenario start to play out or if she was just growing cautious about anything that involved Harry Potter. There was something particularly terrifying about the young man and she was, she had to admit to herself, genuinely afraid of him – even given the fact that he had almost taken, and then with extraordinary magic, saved her life.

As the first matches got under way, Isabelle could see that there was a clear distinction between those whom she had been teaching and those whom Harry had been teaching. Her students – the ones who did not hang out with or otherwise associate with Harry Potter – were hopelessly outclassed. Even her two best students, Evan and Stuart O'Malley – twins from PEI who were 6th year students – were almost instantly demolished by Luna Lovegood and Tracey Davis, forth and fifth-year students, respectively.

The next set was, by the luck of the draw, Lady Potter versus Fred Weasley. To his credit, Fred was fast and inventive and used both disapparation and disillusionment, both on himself and obstacles in and around Hermione, so that she might be tripped up or that her concentration might be broken. However, he just wasn't physically fast enough to keep her from getting behind him and then using a series of wandless, silent curses and charms to first strip him of his pants and boxers and then to tie him up, so that he hung upside down from the ceiling, bare-arsed.

The entire match took no more than twenty seconds. When it was over, and Fred had been released from the trap Hermione had created for him, he mooned her in front of the whole class, before stomping off to get dressed. His behavior might have, in other circumstances earned him a detention or lost credit for the days' activities, but he was allowed to slide, since it was done 'in the heat of battle'.

The battles wore on for the next twenty minutes and it soon became a game, played with good cheer by all involved, to see how fast one of the combatants could divest the other of his or her clothing, while still ending the match in a decisive fashion. There were hoots and hollers as both girls and boys lost clothing; the boys generally coming off worse in the match-ups.

The last pair to battle was Harry and Neville. The Hogwarts crew, at the not-so-quiet instigation of Fred and George, started making bets as to how long the match might go.

Before they started, Harry turned to Isabelle. "Professor?"

"Yes Harry? Is there something amiss?" She couldn't see anything and thought that just maybe, he was stalling for time.

"No. I just want to make sure that no matter what happens here, you stay out of it." His voice didn't leave a lot of room for argument and her previous experience dueling him made her acquiesce almost immediately; acknowledging his request with a nod of her head.

Harry and Neville went to their respective sides of the dueling mats and then formally acknowledged the other with a flourish. As she had often done for them during the summer, Luna Lovegood stepped out to the middle and lifted her wand, so that each could

see its glowing tip. She looked at them and then released a floating ball of light. "Begin!"

Harry disappeared immediately, as did Neville, and for the next several minutes they took turns appearing around the room in unpredictable places. It was almost by accident that they appeared, almost simultaneously, at the same spot, near where Ginny stood. It was Neville's rotten luck that he was facing the wrong way at the time. Almost immediately, his own clothes attacked him; first binding his arms to his side and then oozing off him in such a way as to leave exposed his prodigious 'wand' and the rock-hard body that training with Harry and the others had given him, but leaving him otherwise completely unable to fight back. He was quickly stupefied.

There were, instantly, hoots of applause and appreciation from all of the girls present for not just the victory, but the 'show' as well. Harry revived Neville, who blushed furiously as his wives helped him to his feet.

When he was dressed again, Neville found himself being congratulated by those around him. When he was free to do so, Neville said, "You did great, Harry." A win was always a good thing...but so was sportsmanship, and he would never forget that – especially in Harry's case, as Harry never, ever failed to congratulate him on his wins.

Mindful of the strong friendship between the two, Harry said to him, "if we'd been outside, mate, you'd have cooked my goose". Neville thought that a fair comment and smiled broadly.

Isabelle watched the combat and then the interaction afterward and wondered if she would ever get control of the class again. Harry was such a natural leader and teacher and it almost seemed like swimming against the tide to even bother.

As the class broke up, she watched the students file out. The last group to go was made up of the two stunning blondes, Lord and Lady Potter, and the grey-cloaked red-head. The last person out the door was, in fact, the red-head, and for a moment, Isabelle pondered what might happen if she broke the Headmistresses' mandate and pulled the girl aside for a conversation. Then, as the girl's hand came up to lift her cowl into place, Isabelle saw the thing

that made her heart almost stop cold: the lattice pattern around her wrist that had but one meaning world-wide: Slave.

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Office of the Headmistress, L'ecole des Sorcier du Quebec – a half-hour later.

Madame Thérèse Renaude Lapointe sat at her desk, her coffee cold and only half-drunk, muttering in French and then in Russian about the evils of paperwork and the cursed necessity of doing mid-semester reviews of all of the teachers at the school. It wasn't ever something she liked doing, and certainly none of the teachers really liked having it done to them, but they all recognized the necessity of having evaluations done. It kept the teachers sharp and well-motivated.

The door banged open, startling the calm of the sun-lit room and sending dust-motes everywhere.

"Headmistress!" the voice said. "Have you a moment? I need...."

"Come in. Have a seat. I will be with you in a moment" the older witch said somewhat brusquely; not bothering to even lift her eyes. She knew by the voice who had come to see her.

Isabelle Gatineau did as bidden; taking the seat directly opposite to her Headmistress and folding her hands in her lap. There was a small dish of hard maple-sugar candies on the desk –the gift of one of her former students who had returned to his beloved Vermont and the sugar-maple farm that had been in his family for close to two hundred years, but she disciplined herself and didn't take one.

When the Headmistress thought that her sometimes wayward DADA professor had waited long enough, she put the magical writing quill down and lifted her eyes to meet those of the younger woman.

"Well? What brings you to my office, so worked up?" She could feel the younger woman's magic from where she sat, and it was indeed at an excited level.

"It's Potter...that girl you told me about? SHE'S HIS SLAVE. You've got to do something!"

Lifting her glasses from the bridge of her nose, Thérèse Renaude Lapointe rubbed the bridge where they sat with one hand while trying to resist the urge to curse the young Auror-turned-DADA professor. Rash impetuosity was one of the things she found most frustrating. Sighing, she folded her glasses and set them on the table. They were mostly for show anyway, and she felt weighed down by them in moments like this.

"Isabelle Marie Gatineau, I am invoking the secrets portion of your contract. You are bound by my word! SO MOTE IT BE."

The flash and the sudden, low gong! let them both know that the magic of the contract had indeed taken hold and that whatever was discussed would be protected and held inside her; free and safe from any type of detection or coercion. For a brief moment, Isabelle's heart fluttered and she knew that there was much more at stake than the life of one red-headed girl. It had to be so or her Headmistress would not have invoked the contract the way she did.

"What? Why?" she stammered.

"You are a silly, foolish young woman, Isabelle, and are meddling in things that are way beyond you. However, since you came barging in here, insisting on knowing and further – insisting that I "do something", I will tell you. The knowledge comes with a price, though. You too will be one of the ones Mr. Potter's enemies come searching for, if the war that is raging in their homeland makes it to these shores."

She wanted to scoff at the idea, but the look on her Headmistresses' face told her that she was quite earnest in her assessment. "You don't even know who Mr. Potter really is, do you?"

"No, Ma'am. All I really know is that he's extremely powerful, a natural-born teacher in class; that the brunette he is with is his wife, the Lady Potter, and is a hero to the English."

"I thought you were smarter than that, Isabelle. I thought you'd have bothered to look him up. His story's in just a mere sixty or seventy books."

"How can that be? He's just what? 15? 16?"

"Isabelle, remind me to fire you when this semester is over" she said. "Were you not paying attention at all when Lord Black sat right across from you and TOLD us all about Lord Potter? Don't you remember anything? You knew then how important Harry is to all of us!"

Fuming, the Headmistress rested her face in her hands, trying to rub the stress out of her dry, tired eyes for a moment, before looking up again and continuing. "That scar – you know...the one that Harry has on his forehead? Well, that scar is what's left of Lord Potter's attacker, Tom Marvolo Riddle, when Riddle tried to use the killing curse on him. It didn't work and Riddle was quite effectively disincorporated, which is one of the reasons for the boy's fame. That was October thirty-first, 1981. Unfortunately for Potter, Riddle's spirit has recently been re-animated...given a new body...and Riddle is out to try killing Potter again, while at the same time taking over all of the United Kingdom, Europe, and the Americas, if he can manage it...or Potter doesn't kill him first.

Now, you've come all the way over here to try to cause trouble for Potter who, we both know, saved your miserable hide after you went and did something remarkably stupid during your duel. You should know that more than a few members of the Board of Governors told me that I should have fired you after you were discharged from the hospital, but I told them that it was too late then to try to find another DADA instructor. In other words...I defended you. However, all of that is now beside the point. You came here yelling about the young woman who's now his slave."

Isabelle nodded glumly, feeling more and more foolish as the minutes passed.

"Lord Black came around to my office on the 3rd and told me everything; so that we'd be able to avoid just this kind of situation. The young woman, formally Ginevra Molly Weasley, owed Potter a life-debt...but before that debt was discharged, she foolishly and stupidly tried to conspire with her own mother – who's now dead, by the way - to trap Lord Potter into an unwanted marriage, by way of a pregnancy. Potter found out about the plot after he married Hermione Granger, the Lady Potter, in June. Potter, or one of the people around him, discovered that Ginevra had been, magically controlled via runes on her back, by her own mother, and fed a

steady diet of potions intended to enhance her looks, intellect, and to some degree her personality. To release her from that, Potter did the only thing that he could and called the life-debt. That had the effect of freeing Ginevra from the control of the runes and discharging the debt. Unfortunately, he did it here on Canadian soil, where taking a slave in this fashion is a serious felony, in both the magical and Muggle worlds. I've sworn all of the other teachers to silence, save for you. Now you've forced me to demand your silence as well, while at the same time making yourself an unwitting target of Riddle's, if his people figure out that Potter is here and not in the States."

A shudder of fear ran through her and she suddenly and very much wanted to go home.

"When you attacked the Lady Potter, I thought for sure that I was going to have to look for another DADA teacher. I heard it from sixty feet away when he broke all of the bones in your body and I thought for sure that no one could survive that...but you did, thanks to his money and his stubborn efforts to make sure that you received the very best medical treatment. Now you're sitting in front of me, demanding that I do something about the fact that a stupid, vain little girl put herself in a very bad position; one from which HE had to extricate her. If you were smarter, you'd have left this alone..." she paused for a tic, before continuing, "but you didn't, and now I have to decide whether it would just be easier to Oblivate you and take Lord Potter's DADA tutor on to finish out the rest of the year as your replacement."

"But you can't! You wouldn't!" Isabelle protested; her voice panicky.

"I can, I assure you. As to whether I will or not....should probably be left to Lord and Lady Potter. I imagine that they will have a few things to say about your remaining worth to them and to this school. In the mean time however, you are relieved of your duties. I will find someone to cover your classes. That will be all."

It was clear from her tone that the Headmistress was done with the conversation for the moment and that she was dismissed. Rising, she retreated from the room. Emotions were warring within her as she walked: Fear, sadness, and shame. As she made her way out of the building, another joined them: anger.

Once she left the Headmistresses' office, she walked across the green – which reminded her strongly of the 'quad' at Harvard University – and then made her way up the smooth, granite steps that lead into the four-story, multi-purpose building that was called Ottawa Hall. The hall was one of more than ten buildings that made up the central campus. Ontario, Alberta, and Manitoba Halls were tall (six-story) dormitories, while Newfoundland and Labrador Halls were the social science and hard-science halls, respectively.

As she walked, Isabelle considered what she could do next. She was allowed to leave campus, of course, and probably ought to, given the disciplining that she had just received. As she made her way up to the staff library, she wondered whether what had just happened to her would make its way around the campus or if it would be kept quiet, so that she could retain some measure of dignity. She hoped that it would be the case, because it would be humiliating to have it any other way. It was a beautiful campus and she had grown to love it. It felt like home. 'And I'd not even be allowed to miss it!' she thought to herself, bitterly.

As she thought about it, the new emotion – anger - started to grow within her. It was not, unfortunately, directed where it should be, which was inward. The fact that she was the one who was most responsible for the position for the position in which she now found herself was completely lost on her. More, so worried was she that her job was at stake that the fact that her life was potentially on the line escaped her. It was something that others might point out later on, but she was alone at the moment and out of sanity's reach.

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Late afternoon, Hogs Head Inn, just outside Hogsmeade, Scotland,
Thursday, November 23, 1995

It was quiet in the Inn. Too quiet, really. For more than two weeks, not a single Death-eater had entered the Inn and Aberforth was beginning to grow concerned. They had been a talkative group, unaware as they were about his wards and ways of listening to conversations, and he had gleaned a great deal about what Riddle was facing for problems. However, those problems seemed to have suddenly gone away...and that portended bad things for the good guys.

Looking out the bay window that covered most of the front of the Inn's main-street level, Aberforth could see the snow falling softly in the streets. Before Riddle's take-over, the streets had been full of patrons in the late afternoon. Not now. Now it was barely a trickle and those were mostly poor (and elderly) pure-bloods who were looking for something to do or someone to talk to.

It was a good thing, he thought, that the Inn had long since been paid for and that the property taxes, such as they had been, were no longer being collected, because the Inn was no longer making any money. Turning back to look about the Inn's main room, Aberforth started cleaning. It was laborious work, even if one did it magically, but it hadn't been done in so long that it gave him something to do. In ten days or so, if the Inn hadn't had any customers, he'd hang up the 'closed' sign for good and go off to find Robert. If that didn't work, he'd try to find Arthur. After that, he just didn't know.

Up the hill from the village, in the Castle itself, the scene was considerably different. In the main hall, two tall, black men wearing long, colorful red- and yellow-print robes were speaking with Riddle himself, as they stood on either side of one of the small tables. In front of them was a pile of very recognizable jewelry.

"Three eighty-two, American" the shorter one said to the dark lord, which earned him a scowl.

"Three ninety-five, American, for the gold pieces, and market plus fifteen percent for the jewels", the other said. This earned him a bit more of a tolerable expression from the dark lord, but quiet hisses from some of his followers.

"The Muggle queen will pay anything my lord asks to get these back! Why should he accept such paltry sums from you?" Bellatrix asked menacingly.

The taller, older black man, whose hair was beginning to turn white, turned and said to her politely, "He will accept it because we'll be taking on all of the risk; leaving him with hard, untraceable currency." The dark lord's faithful right hand seethed, but kept her wand away.

Finding the Tutsis bankers had been an incredible stroke of luck, Riddle knew, though he wouldn't tell either of them so. Their general loathing of all things European was completely exploitable. The British (Muggle) government and its history of antagonistic involvement in Africa was a good stand-in for the Germans and Belgians, whom the Tutsis greatly hated. That loathing, combined with total and fanatical hatred of the Hutu majority in Rwanda who, the previous year, had massacred six hundred to seven hundred thousand of their Tutsis brethren, served Riddle's purposes well, since both of the Tutsis bankers in front of him had jumped at the chance to take from the British one of their most cherished possessions. Not only would it force the British to abase themselves in front of the Tutsis, but it would fetch more than a billion pounds sterling in ransom. That was money which would fuel a punishing revenge on the Hutu.

Riddle looked at them; his flat, snake-like face and red, burning eyes unnerving both of them. "How much, total?" he asked. He was a dark, immortal lord after all, and not a banker.

"Six hundred ninety-five million, American; payable in any currency you like, without exchange fees" the shorter one said, his face expressionless.

"Seven hundred sixty-five million, American" the taller one said. "No exchange fee."

"Done" Riddle said. It was twenty-two times the nominal 'face-value' of the jewels (which were actually worth about £20,000,000 or roughly \$36,000,000 USD), but the dark lord neither knew nor cared.

The taller man smiled a small, enigmatic smile before taking out his wand very slowly, as to assure those present that he meant no harm, and pointing it at a bag on the table. "Agrandir" he said in French. Slowly, the bag expanded, so that it once again resembled a standard bank-satchel. Undoing the fasteners which held the bag closed, the taller man began withdrawing banded stacks of American dollars, in stacks of \$100's, and laying them on the table. This process went on for a very, very long time.

When the process was complete (almost thirty minutes later) and all parties concerned had agreed that the proper amount of money had

been presented, the taller man again waved his wand at the jewels. They began to pack themselves, one at a time, into the bag.

When the two Tutsis bankers had left via port-key, Riddle turned to all of his followers who, by now, had heard the news and had gathered in the Great Hall. Sweeping his arms out about him he stepped up onto the dais and said, "Death eaters! Hear me. We have struck another blow against the Muggles today. Their precious jewels have become our re-birthing pool! We shall take these funds and use them to build up our army again and when we have done that, we shall show the magical world why we are to be feared!"

There was a great cheer in the hall and many of the Death-eaters thought about all the things that could be done with the amount of Muggle currency that had just been presented to their master. It wasn't as accepted as wizard-money (Galleons in the UK and magical Deutschmarks in Europe), but it could be converted to gold or used to buy all manner of other things. The benefit to American money was that it could be taken to France or German or even Italy and exchanged for Pounds, with no one the wiser.

"Bella, a celebration is in order. Find all the food you can in the area and have it brought to the Castle. It is time we dined properly and began planning for our next campaign!"

"Yes, Master!" she said, and then turned on her heel and made her way out of the Hall. She was as happy as any of them, in her own perverse and psychotic way, about having a party.

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Prime Minister's Office – 10 Downing Street, London, UK – Friday, November 24, 1995

The Prime Minister's office, not to mention the Royal Household, were both in uproar. The vitriol and anger was at level that no Prime Minister had ever seen. Not only had the Queen herself 'requested' his presence at the palace early in the morning, so that she could "speak with him" - a gentile way of saying that she had called him to her presence to open a new orifice on his body - but he had been told by those in the highest levels of his own party, just after that meeting, that he would see the return of the Crown jewels or contemplate his failure from the inside of a solitary confinement cell

at Preston prison for the rest of his (very) short life. That such a threat was 'extra-judicial' and technically not within the powers of the people threatening it was completely beside the point. John Major believed strongly that they'd find a way to make it happen....and the people, upon hearing of it, would believe that it was too lenient a punishment.

The thing that had precipitated the Queen's righteous fury, on behalf of the people of the UK, as well as the Royal Family itself, was the ransom note - received early in the morning by Sir David Ogilvy, 13th Earl of Airlie (the Queen's Lord Chamberlain), via a note written on a neatly folded piece of heavy, ivory parchment-paper, by a man dressed all in black, demanding one and one half billion pounds sterling for the safe return of the jewels and stating in clear terms what would happen if the demand wasn't met.

Upon hearing of the demand, Kingsley Shacklebolt conferred with the PM; telling him of his intention to leave Downing Street and call on Albus Dumbledore, whom he thought had to be involved in whatever was to be done. While the PM didn't know the old wizard personally, he knew a very great deal about him, and agreed therefore that Kingsley should do as he had suggested. What wasn't said was that there wasn't an alternative. Albus was the most powerful wizard still in the Kingdom, outside of Riddle himself, and if anyone could suggest a course forward, he would be the one.

As he made his way outside of the wards that he himself had set to prevent unauthorized portkey- and apparition access to the PM's office, Kingsley mused on the issue of having two masters at the same time. Wondering if it wasn't exactly the situation that Severus Snape had faced (though for altogether different reasons), he considered just how much he had given up about the magical world and if, in the long run, he might have done more in the last six weeks to undermine the Statute of Secrecy than any other witch or wizard ever.

Making his way down the white marble steps and into the foyer, he felt the wards shift around him and therefore knew at the precise moment when he had stepped into a portion of the building from which apparition was possible. By his own design, it was the most open and therefore the most vulnerable spot for any witch or wizard. As the meeting point of two inwardly-pointing defensive cones, there was nowhere to hide and nowhere to run to if the Muggle defenders

had to make a stand. Magical attackers would be forced out into the open, giving the Muggle defenders the chance to cut them down in the murderous cross-fire.

Smiling wanly to himself at the awful, but effective nature of what he had designed, he gathered himself and disappeared. His last thought before doing so was, "I hope this works".

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As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

Chapter Fourteen – "Winter of Discontent"

By the_scribbler

the_scribbler (at) shadowgard (d*t) com

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CONTENT Disclaimer: This story may contain sexually graphic and explicit material and as such, it is not suitable for minors. If you are a minor, please leave now, as it is illegal for you to be here. If it is illegal for you to read or view sexually explicit material in the community you view such material, please leave now. This story and characters are purely fictional and any resemblance to events or persons (living or dead) is purely coincidental. If you are offended by sexually explicit stories, please read no further. These stories are just that, stories, and do not promote or condone the activities described herein

Note One: Canon? What canon? This story is an amalgam of several different story lines (of mine) and does not adhere to any one particular AU. THIS IS A HARRY/HERMIONE/OTHER SHIP. IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, DISEMBARK!

Note Two: the BAJA RECLUSE spider (*Loxosceles Palma*), mentioned herein, is very, very real and very poisonous. It is one of a number of Recluse spiders that inhabit the US and Central/South America. The bite of just one of these can be fatal. See: [en \(dot\) wikipedia \(dot\) org/wiki/Recluse_spider](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recluse_spider)

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From Chapter Thirteen – "A House Divided"

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Just after Four AM, Saturday, November 25, 1995 - 46 Trinity Church Road, just off Wyatt Drive; West London, UK

Kingsley Shacklebolt, disillusioned and with his foot-falls silenced, moved through the darkness quietly and quickly, not bothering to look behind him. No one knew of this location yet and it was the best location for doing what had to be done. When he reached the door of the house, he turned towards the street and flicked his wand three times. "There. That should do it" he thought, as he cast a Muggle-repelling charm, a disillusionment charm over the entire front of the house, and an anti-apparition ward. There was more he could have added, but he was in a hurry and there just wasn't time.

Once inside, Kingsley dropped his magical defenses and made his way to the living room where, he hoped, there would be coffee and food waiting for him. It had been a great many hours since he had last eaten or slept, so coffee was a priority.

Two house-elves brought the food (sausage pizza with lots cheese) and coffee that he needed (light-roast, Columbian coffee – high caffeine content with no bitter aftertaste) and he sat down to wait,

praying that it wouldn't be too long. He was in danger of falling asleep, despite the sustenance.

Ten and then fifteen minutes ticked by. The pizza was settling nicely and the coffee warmed him. A half-hour passed by. He fell asleep, his head lolling backwards against the wing of the high-backed chair. He dreamed of horses thundering across a plain and of a great, black Hippogriff leading them.

"Kingsley!"

A hand shook his shoulder.

"Kingsley, man. Wake up."

Kingsley opened his eyes and looked around. "What time is it?" he said, groggy with accumulated fatigue.

"It's half-six."

The powerful, black Auror sat up quickly and looked about. The six people – wizards all – whom he hoped would appear were standing around him. "We came as quickly as we could, Kingsley. I have to say, I wasn't expecting your note – especially after I had made my feelings known during the last Order meeting."

"Aye, lad. You've got the right of that. I didn't expect it either."

Mad-eye Moody's brogue only came out when he was either very tired or very agitated. Since he looked like he was well-enough awake, Kingsley thought it had to be the latter.

Standing and facing them all, he said, "Well, the Kneazles are among the pixies now, as Figgy used to say. I've got a lot to tell you all, so you might as well sit down. We've got decisions to make and not a lot of time. Lexie!"

There was a pop! and the almost-pretty house-elf appeared. "Yes, sirs? What is Lexie doing for you, masters?"

Reaching down, in an uncharacteristically gentle move, Kingsley swept the house-elf up in his right arm and held her up so that he could speak to her face-to-face. It caught the little elf by surprise, but

she didn't pop away and she didn't seem at all distressed by his action. "I need you to ward the house for us with your magic. For the next two hours, we can't be disturbed. Once you've done that, could you please go and make some of that wonderful coffee that you made for me earlier? And maybe some blueberry scones and jam?"

Lexie nodded, her face alight with pleasure. "Yes, master Shackles, sir. Lexie goes right now!"

Leaning forward, Kingsley kissed her forehead and said, "You're a great help, Lexie. Thank you."

The kiss did it. She burst into happy tears and then popped! away.

A silence fell over the room, as each of the men present looked at him.

"What?" he said, defensively.

The Unspeakable, Algernon Croaker, looked at him, surprised at what he had just witnessed. "You know that the only other person to treat house-elves like that was Potter, right? And you know that the elf, Dobby, bonded to him directly – and not with the typical house-elf bond, but as a familiar would. You've got to be careful."

Kingsley thought about it for a moment, realized that he didn't mind having Lexie as an elf-friend, and said, "Well, that's ok then."

If there were more questions about his treatment of Lexie, they went unspoken as Kingsley went about explaining to the assembled men what had happened the night before and what was going on within Her Majesty's government. At the two-hour mark, a tentative plan was in place, though it needed refinement.

"Are you sure that Dumbledore is going to be alright with this? I mean...we all know how he is about second chances and all...." The speaker, Hephaestus Perkins, was an Order-member and a senior Unspeakable.

"Albus will be told only as much as he needs to know for the moment. This order comes from Her Majesty directly; superseding any oath that we might have made previously." Algernon nodded. His oath as an Unspeakable, in service to the Department of

Mysteries, was as binding as any could be...but like all oaths, was lower in (magical) priority than orders given by their sovereign queen.

"What I'm worried about" Tiberius Ogden said from the across the room, "Is that giving the Muggle forces – even those who are supposedly sworn to secrecy - such information about the way we cast magic and the practical limitations of spell-work will help them to eventually work out a way to overcome any witch or wizard. The Statute of Secrecy...and the mystery, if you will, which surrounds magic...has always been our best protection against the Muggles. Take those things away and we could be staring at our own end."

"If you've got a better plan, Tiberius, then I am all ears. We've talked this through a hundred ways to Sunday already and I can't think of another way to draw out Riddle's forces and expose them to the Muggle forces."

Clearly, the majority didn't like it – Kingsley could see that plainly – but there really wasn't another alternative. They weren't going to be able to get the Crown Jewels back unless or until Riddle's forces were eradicated. Dumbledore's high-minded lectures about the importance and worth of the 'traditional wizarding families' and his insistent and borderline threatening suggestions / cajolery aside, there were just too many Death Eaters to ignore and Her Majesty's government had to be seen as doing something to resolve the situation. Destroying Riddle or at least destroying his forces (and the 'traditional wizarding families' be damned) was the answer. THEN they could turn to hunting down those who had taken the jewels out of the country.

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Just after nightfall, Friday, December 01, 1995 – Village of Nouainville, France – South of Cherbourg-Octeville

A wet, cold mist blanketed the field as Ron looked out into the night. The fireplace next to him crackled and warmed his back and the mulled wine in his hand warmed his insides, but there was something biting at him: the letter in his other hand.

Dearest Ron:

I don't know where you are and I don't know how long it will be before I see you, but I want you to know that I love you and that I miss you. I never took the time to tell you that I love you when we were at home together, but things have changed a lot for me and now I know just how important you were to me, even if I said you were a prat at times. You WERE a prat, but I don't think you're one anymore and anyway, it doesn't matter. You are my brother and nothing can separate us. That's a lesson I've learned.

I also want you to know that I am safe and learning incredible magic. Harry and all of his tutors are teaching me. I can't tell you anything more than that. The second is that Dad is here – I can't tell you where 'here' is though...there's loads of magic protecting this place...and he wants you to know how much he loves you. I think he will write to you soon, but I can't promise. He hurts over what he had to do, even if you're in good hands. Dad hasn't ever been very good at saying what he feels – but that doesn't matter. I see that now. He always showed us how much he loves all of us by what he did. It was MOM who was the problem. I never told you what she did to me...but it was....well, Harry can tell you, when we finally see each other again. Also, 'cause it's kind of related to some other stuff that I've learned....If you haven't already, you need to go to some you trust and have him or her get you a potions neutralizer. I am willing to bet anything that Mom feed you a control potion for all of the time that you lived at home. She did it at Dumbledore's direction – but SHE DID IT WILLINGLY – she wanted Harry's money and she tried to use US to get it. Once you've taken the neutralizer, you'll see the world totally differently. There's a lot more that I want to tell you, but I can't...at least not here. It's not safe.

Send me your Patronus when you get this letter.

I MISS YOU. I MISS YOU. I MISS YOU.

Love always,

Ginny

A voice behind him interrupted his reverie and he turned to see who it was. From the shadows, his master appeared. Ron automatically set his cup down on the nearby side-table, put his hands by his side, and bowed his head. It was a sign of respect for his master.

Robert saw his charge's reaction and saw, too, the sad look on the boy's face. "Still bothering you, son?"

Ron nodded. He had always found it hard to conceal his emotions. He couldn't school his face the way that Harry had always been able to do. Robert hadn't asked to read the letter, but he did so now. Numbly, Ron extended his hand and the tall, bearded man took the letter from him gently.

Patiently, Ron stood by the fire for his master to finish reading the hand-written note. The owl that had been entrusted with it had found Ron early in the day, while he had been out in the barn, tending the horses. His first reaction had been shock and the second – elation – that his sister's letter had found him. It had been a couple of months since he had heard from her.

Handing the note back, he said, "You're luckier than you know, son. My own sister thinks I'm dead and I dare not contact her yet, for fear that she'll do something rash." His words were soft, with a touch of sad humor to them. Ron had had no idea that his master had a sister, nor did he know the circumstances surrounding his master's early life. All he did know was that Robert the Fierce had been a former Auror, along with Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody, and that the two had trained together at the Auror Academy in Sussex.

Ron looked at him and then asked, "Master? Do you think she's right...? I mean, about the potions thing?"

Robert the Fierce looked down at his charge – as his height (6'8") really didn't allow him to do anything else – and nodded. "Perhaps. There's no harm in getting some. If she's right, then we'll know pretty quickly. If not, then the neutralizer will simply flush out in a day or two."

Accepting his master's words, Ron took the note and folded it carefully, before putting it in the inner pocket of his robe. Looking around the dinning room, which was lit by gas-fired wall-sconces, Ron bucked up his courage. "Master? Why are we here?"

The answer came after the tall man leaned back against the long, oak table that dominated the room. "I have business here, son, and we're safe. That's all you need to know for the moment. When the

time is right, I will tell you more. Until then, you must trust me and do as I say."

"Yes, Master" was all Ron could say. There was a part of him that had come alive when he read his sister's words and in that moment, his training felt, suddenly, less important than it had. A new feeling had sprung up in him and he was anxious to do something about it.

"Aye, lad, I can see in your eyes something more. Family is a strong pull. Hard to resist. But you must. We have another year together, at the minimum, before I will be satisfied that you are who you should be. Your father expects no less. You shouldn't either."

Ron felt another wave of emotion. This time, however, it was the desire to do something that would make his father and his sister proud of him. Robert smiled inwardly as he saw the light in Ron's eyes shift and his expression change to something that bespoke determination of a new sort. There was hope for his charge after all, the thought. Good.

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Late evening, Saturday, December 9, 1995 - 21 Rue Jacques Ferron, Trois-Rivières, Quebec

In the darkness of the moonless night, Harry Potter and his three loves lay together, warm and contented, while their slave lay nearby, untouched and fighting sleep, watching and wishing for things that were, for the moment, impossible. Harry slept, peaceful, happy, and warm; curled around the naked, thoroughly sated, and almost impossibly beautiful Hermione Potter. Behind him, curled around him in much the same way, lay Hannah Potter and Fleur Delacour-Potter. They too slept naked and each was as sated and happy as the brunette who lay in the young wizard's arms.

Finally, the young woman who had laid awake by herself until well past midnight finally lost the fight with her own desires and left her bed, to crawl into the massive, shared bed. She curled up on the other side of the brunette who, because of her position as lady of the lord's demesne, lay in the prime position in the bed.

The sun's rays didn't penetrate the dark room until well past 7, since the curtains that covered the room's many windows were made from

hand-knotted crewel fabric that had, as a motif, the many family trees from which the lord of the house descended.

When, at last, the warming light of the sun struck the bed and its sleepy inhabitants, none grumbled louder than Hermione.

When she moved, she felt a warm, silky-soft, feminine body next to hers, one that was definitely not there the previous evening. Opening her eyes, she saw the bright red hair that formed a disorganized halo around the young girl's head. "Ginny?" she said in a whisper.

The soft, contralto voice brought the redhead out of her fading twilight sleep and her eyes snapped open.

"Ginny!"

To her credit, the young girl, who was both witch and slave, turned and looked down. Hermione Potter, now propped up on her elbow, stared at her. Without rancor, but with a definite underlayment of steel in her voice, she said, "I think you know what I want to know, Ginny"

The younger witch swallowed hard and then looked at Harry, who had awoken just as soon as he had heard the swirling thoughts in his wives' minds. He looked back at her and she saw a noticeable absence of anger or concern.

"I was cold and....I didn't want to be alone any longer. I couldn't fall asleep last night after the four of you had..." She couldn't say 'fucked like bunnies', though it was an apt description of the previous nights' activities.

Hermione Potter thought about it for a moment and then said, "Why last night? You've seen us make love before."

Unable to lie to either Hermione or Harry, because of her state of bondage, Ginny said simply, "I couldn't stop myself. I wanted someone to hold me and touch me, like Harry was holding and touching you."

Hermione began to react when Harry's thoughts touched hers. "It's alright, Hermione. Really...I don't mind that she joined us. I didn't tell

her that she couldn't and there's really no reason that she shouldn't – as long as she's always sleeping on the outside, next to one of you."

Harry knew, because he had felt their minds and thoughts join his and Hermione's, that Hannah and Fleur were awake and listening to what was going on.

"We're going to have to resolve this issue, Harry, and soon."

What Hermione meant by 'this issue', Harry knew, was the whole issue of Ginny's enslavement and how it impacted the four-way relationship between Harry, Hermione, Fleur, and Hannah. Keeping a slave was wrong. It was morally repugnant and Harry knew it – but knew, too, that at the time he hadn't had any other choice as it regarded Ginny. Those feelings had become the reason why, at Harry's insistence, he, Sirius, Remus, Minerva, and Arthur had, quietly, taken to tutoring Ginny privately and pushing her so hard, magically. They knew that Harry very much wanted to release Ginny and admired him for his strong and unwavering adherence to the promise that he had made to his three girls not to have any kind of sexual or in any other way abusive contact with Ginny while she was a slave.

"I'd be happy to keep her occupied, Harry. She's already indicated that she'd like it." Hannah said salaciously.

"You know what she wants, Hannah-love. Are you alright with that?"

Hannah grinned- both externally and across their link. "Yes. Besides, Gin and I have enough in common that we'll be fine. I'm pretty sure that between Hermione, Fleur, and I that we could keep her distracted for the next year, if we had to. Not that we want it to go on that long, though. Hopefully, our troubles with Tommy-boy will be sorted out before that and you can release her."

Harry, the girls all knew, was pinning a great many of his hopes on a grand meeting that Sirius, Remus, and Minerva had called for just after the New Year. It was a meeting that would be attended by all of the (former) Hogwarts students whom Harry felt he could trust, along with all of the adults who had come across the pond, either in support of Harry or in an attempt to get away from the Headmaster, his short-sighted beliefs, and the terrible consequences of those

beliefs. It would become, Harry hoped, the forum for planning their collective next move. It would also be, Harry knew, probably the last time that Ginny would ever see her father...and that was a much greater weight about his shoulders than the prophecy which connected him to Riddle had ever been.

He wondered, and his wives knew it, though they couldn't share it with Ginny, because of the pain that it would cause her, whether the declaration of a blood-war 'unto the fifth generation', which Arthur had made to Riddle would, in fact, hasten his death. Grimly, Harry thought it probably would. Fate was a bitch like that. Arthur was a very good man, Harry knew, and would have made an excellent father-in-law, if things had been different. But they weren't and there was no point in speculating about what would never be (even if he had wanted things to work out that way, which he most assuredly didn't).

As the thoughts about Arthur came and went from his head again, Harry saw his three girls smiling at him; waiting for him to decide what to do next. It was, after all, a Sunday morning and there was no real, pressing reason to get up immediately. Miranda had said that church services weren't until 10:30, anyway.

Suddenly, above him, in fiery magical numbers, the time appeared. It was 7:45 am. "Too early, loves. Another hour or so?" The girls nodded. Another hour in bed sounded perfect. Hannah reached out a hand and pulled Ginny across the bed. The young girl went willingly and soon the five were snuggled under the warm, goose-down comforters. There were many things yet to be done and many decisions yet to be made...but not one was pressing enough that it had to be done immediately and for once, Harry Potter – the 'boy-who-lived' – didn't have to carry the full burden. Others could help and he knew that they wanted to...so he lay back and let the warmth and love around him call him back to the unique twilight-sleep wherein he, Hermione, Hannah, and Fleur dreamed together and shared love.

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Across the river, in the woods off Rue Sicard, a small private road at the far northern edge of Montreal's city limits, House Longbottom had made its home. The demesne of Lord and Ladies Longbottom was an extremely secure, 8-bedroom home, done in a traditional

French style. The interior of the house was eclectic; blending traditional wizarding needs (a secure, fireproof potions-making room) with the best of Muggle designs (a full electronic entertainment room, top-of-the-line Muggle kitchen, and climate-controlled wine-cellar).

The two things that set it apart from most Muggle houses were the matching set of green-houses that extended into the back yard (river-side) of the home and the dominant master-bedroom (which looked oddly similar to the master bedroom of the home that was now the center of House Potter-Gryffindor). Those changes, plus the wards which encircled and defended the house, made it a true wizarding household. To Neville Longbottom, it was truly a home.

In the early morning light, which had been dimmed somewhat by the overcast and graying sky, that had been made so by threatening clouds of snow that were moving into the area, Neville Longbottom dreamed happy dreams. His sleep, like that of the three young ladies who were his bonded wives and consorts, was the perfect sleep of someone who knew total security and love. He dreamed with them; a miracle made possible by the intense and complete bonding of their magic and souls to one another.

If asked about it, Neville would reply that what he and his three shared was far better, greater, and more sustaining than even Harry Potter's situation – though, privately, he'd admit that he didn't know that for an absolute certainty. Susan, Padma, and Parvati would, if they heard him talking about it, smile at him and accept his indulgent claim. They knew how proud he was to be able to love and protect them and they knew, too, that their bond had been, at least in part, responsible for Neville's incredible magical growth.

However, Neville would readily admit that he owed to Harry a bond of love and fidelity as well. Harry's family was senior to his – being older by more than seven hundred years...not even mentioning that Harry was Lord Gryffindor as well, while Neville was not. That wasn't what cemented the relationship, however. The truth was that Harry had done everything in his power to show Neville how much trust and friendship he invested in him; including making Neville his closest (non-wife) confidant and advisor, just as Sirius Black, and James Potter had once been. To say that they were 'as thick as thieves' was to significantly understate the situation.

At the same time, Harry's closest male friends were Neville Longbottom and the Weasley twins. It was, Harry and Neville both believed, a friendship of equals, though Fred and George Weasley were the first ones to admit that while they were more creative and reckless than Neville and Harry, the two younger boys completely outclassed them in terms of raw magical power.

On this particular morning, Neville lay in the middle of the massive, king-sized (plus) bed, with Susan Bones-Longbottom (though mostly asleep) happily impaled on 'the morning wood'. Parvati lay to his right and Padma on his left; each having claimed an arm around which she could snuggle.

Drifting upwards, out of the land of dreams and towards the wakefulness of day, Susan Bones-Longbottom began to move a little bit; not wanting to leave the warm comfort of her current situation, but seeking a new position in which to repose. It didn't take long for her to come to full consciousness and realize that her husband's incredible cock was deep inside her. It triggered a whole new set of feelings and slowly, she began to move her hips and undulate up and down on the massive, fleshy staff.

As if her movements were some magical trigger, Susan soon felt hands exploring her arse, nether-hole, and caressing her back. They were decidedly feminine hands; being smaller and silkier than her husband's, and they felt wonderful. Padma's lewd thought slipped into her mind as she angled her hips just so and buried the prodigious erection deep in her wet pussy. "Make him cum, love. We'll do you afterward."

The sheer joy of making love with her husband, combined with the eroticism of the situation, one that she thought she'd never get enough of, pushed the beautiful blonde over the edge and into the blissful oblivion of orgasm.

Several hours later, the happy pile finally disentangled; sweaty, happy, and hungry. As they made their way to the warm, communal shower the four reveled in the afterglow of their lovemaking.

Toweling off afterwards, Neville watched his three beautiful wives as they massaged and perfumed each other. Their smiles were like radiant beams of light that illuminated every corner of his soul. Patronus-worthy memories, Harry had called them one evening,

when they were discussing the joy of being married at such a young age. Neville thought that the observation was spot-on. He had no doubt that he could produce a fully corporeal Patronus by focusing on what was now before him. Gran would have been proud, Neville thought to himself.

His suddenly shifting mood caught the attention of his three and they instinctively stopped what they were doing and moved to him, surrounding him with both physical and emotional love.

"She would have been proud, love" Susan said to him across their bond, as she explored the memories that had triggered Neville's thoughts.

"Don't doubt it, love" Padma and Parvati thought to him, in loving echo.

Neville's thoughts flashed towards Harry, with the realization that the lost of Lily and James must have left Harry with lingering doubts too, and he wondered just how Harry had overcome them.

"He has Hermione" Parvati thought to him, even as she silently, wandlessly summoned clothing for all of them from the other room.

The magical arrival of their clothes for the day effectively terminated the conversation – at least for the moment - and refreshed another, pressing need: hunger. Once they were dressed, the four made their way towards the luxurious kitchen and the wafting smells of a very late brunch – something that had become a tradition in their house since arriving in Canada. There would be time, later on, to talk about Harry and the growing relationship between House Longbottom and House Potter...but there were other things to resolve first. Neville quietly hoped, as did his wives, that the 'grand meeting' would allow all of them – those who were committed to actively resisting Riddle and returning home to England to do so – to vent their frustrations with the status quo, as well as their dreams and hopes for a revitalized, magical England where, they all hoped, a new order would be established. It was a big dream, but with so many who were willing to give their lives to make it a reality, Neville believed, maybe as he had never believed before, that something good was going to happen.

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First light of sunrise, Wednesday, January 6, 1996 – The Winery "Chateau Neige et Chevaux", south of Village of Nouainville and west Cherbourg-Octeville.

Mucking out stalls at the crack of dawn was a chore with very few charms to recommend it. However, the one charm that it did offer was extraordinary. Her name was Jeanette Marie Molineux.

The sky was still dark and only the faintest red rays were peeking over the horizon. The clock had yet to strike six when Ron heard the clop-clop-clop of heavy hooves entering the barn where he was working. The warm light of the enclosed gas-light lamps created flickering shadows in all the corners of the barn; hiding the cats and half-kneazles that called it home. Smiling a loopy smile, Ron put down the pitchfork he was using, rested against it, and watched as the auburn-haired beauty walked the massive Clydesdale by, on its way to the warmest stall, where she'd begin the process of curry-combing it and checking each of its shoes, to see if they needed replacing.

For her part, Jeanette didn't bother to try to suppress the smile that tugged at her mouth as she guided the 2200-lb. draft horse towards the inner-most part of the barn. She knew Ron was watching and that was exactly what she wanted.

Thirty minutes passed before the last of the stalls were mucked out and it was a further twenty minutes before all of the new hay had been knocked down from the upper loft and apportioned equally to the six stalls, three to a side, for which he was responsible. Ron felt good that he had even remembered to replace the salt licks and change the water in each of the stalls, so that after each the horses was cleaned, groomed, and re-shod, it had a clean stall to which it could return. Why he was working in a barn, he didn't know, but his master Robert had willed it so, and so it was what he now rose each morning at half-past five to do. Patience, he had learned (sometimes painfully) from his master, was eventually rewarded.

After washing his face and hands with some warm water from the tack-room sink, Ron walked back to find the change of clothes which helped to fend off the worst of the chill that came with the cold, damp air in the barn and the bite of food which he had wrapped up and squirreled away the previous evening. If he had been at home,

he would have used magic to clean up, but here he couldn't, because he wasn't allowed to do magic around the Muggles who dominated the farm unless his very life depended upon it.

Unbeknownst to Ron, the changing of shirts gave Jeanette the chance to see much more than she had expected. His lean, iron-hard, muscular body caused her to suck in a breath, lest she whistle out her appreciation. "Not bad at all...no, not bad at all!" she thought to herself appreciatively, as he buttoned up the new, clean and dry, gray-plaid work-shirt, tucked it in, and then buttoned up his pants, so that he was once again presentable.

Thinking quickly, Jeanette purposefully knocked over a broom that had been leaned against one of the walls, so that it fell with a whack! on the hard, dusty, pine-wood floor. Ron looked up and saw her – in her tight, stretch-cotton, chestnut-brown jodhpurs, with her back to him, bend over to pick it up. 'My god, she's got a great arse' he thought to himself, not knowing that his thoughts weren't private. Her curves were outlined and highlighted by the ribbed edges of her knickers and Ron felt a sudden and massive rush of blood southward as he savored the sight.

Jeanette grinned inwardly. It was just the reaction for which she had been hoping. Straightening up, she looked all around, to see if they were alone and, seeing that they were, turned and sauntered over to him, a small but definitely happy smile on her face.

Her approach was not what he was expecting. They had been polite, sometimes even overtly friendly to each other since he had started working at the barn, but she had not let herself get too close to him before this moment. But now...he smelled delicious and his blood sang out to her. It was as if he had been made for her and for her alone. Worse, at least from the perspective of her fleeing self-control, his magic radiated strongly and hers seemed to be drawn to it. It was a heady, powerful combination. The warning about mating with 'normals' that had been hammered into her by her adoptive French-American parents suddenly seemed a message of long ago and far away.

Stepping up to him, so that she was within a foot or so, she saw how blue his eyes were, how vibrantly red his hair really was, and that the few freckles on his face were a very soft brown, so that they blended into his skin and were unnoticeable except close-up. She

breathed in his scent. It made her nipples grow hard as granite pebbles, and made her pussy wetter than it had ever been before. She wanted Ronald Weasley and she wanted him right now.

Leaning even closer, she said in her softest voice, "Hi".

Ron almost came in his pants. Her voice now, though she had spoken to him in the past, was like nothing else. Soft and lilting, it had a bell-like quality to it that was far more seductive and appealing than siren-song could ever be. Before he could stop himself...and way, way before his brain could get control over his mouth, he said, "You're beautiful".

She giggled. "Thank you. That's sweet of you...though it's not what you were thinking a moment ago was it? Your actual comment was 'My god, she's got a great arse'"

His jaw flopped open, and he was horrified that his inner dialog should come back to haunt him. Especially since up close, there was no longer even a doubt that Jeannette the most beautiful, most desirable girl he had ever met. Standing just shy of 5'7", with a perfect (some would say a supernaturally perfect) 34/35 – 23 – 34 body and flowing, dark Auburn hair, Ron thought her a living goddess. More, her radiate green eyes, and perfect, alabaster skin pushed Hermione Granger even further down, so that she wasn't even a close second....which was a touch odd perhaps, as she had been his standard: the one against whom he had always compared others for so long.

"Don't be afraid" she said, smiling up at him and laying a petite hand on his hard chest and splaying out her fingers so that she could touch as much of him as possible. Holding up a wand that had to have come from somewhere interesting, she said "The answer to the question you were just thinking is yes, I'm a witch. I'm also what we Americans call a telepath. Brits like you call us Legillimancers, but that's too much of a mouthful...and it's not at all accurate."

Just as quickly as it had appeared, her wand disappeared again. Amazed, Ron looked at her and goggled at the things she had just said. "You mean, you can sort through my thoughts?"

She shook her head and then smiled at him reassuringly. "No. I can read your thoughts in the here-and-now, but I can't and don't get

anything more than that. Think of it like listening to an on-going monolog. That's all I get." She didn't mention the fact that no one could keep her out – not even Bella Cullen, the strongest shield (and witch) she or anyone else knew.

To her relief, his face showed the sense of release of tension that had gathered when she disclosed her ability to him and then he smiled shyly. "Guess I'll have to be more careful about what I think around you".

She looked at him and, feeling the desire for him pounding away in her chest and then out to all of her erogenous zones, Jeanette couldn't help but lean in even closer so that he could feel her very warm breath and see the gleam in her eyes. "I don't want you to. I like those thoughts."

Ron studied her and wondered what he should do. She wasn't like anyone he had ever met before. Finally, he decided to be the Gryffindor that the sorting-hat had said he was and reached up with both hands; letting them come to rest on her slim hips.

Pleased that he had taken the first step, Jeanette leaned in close and whispered in his right ear, "Good...but not good enough. Why don't you put those hands where they really belong?"

"Because I'm afraid to? Because I don't want to do the wrong thing?" He thought to her, knowing now that she'd hear it.

"You catch on quick" she whispered back to him, before she used her own hands to guide his down to her arse. "Much better."

"Can I....can I kiss you?" he thought, even as he gave into the desire that was roaring in his own body and cupped her magnificent arse so that she was pulled up against his hard, lean body.

Tilting her head just so, and leaning back a little, she captured his mouth with hers; careful not to cut him with her razor-sharp, extremely elongated canine (biting) teeth, and let herself be swept away with the desire for him that was blazing within her. The feeling of his strong hands on her arse, combined with the delicious pressure that his stone-hard erection was putting on her jodhpur-covered sex pushed her into her first-ever climax in someone else's hands.

When they finally broke for air, and the jackhammer that was her heart had eased a bit, she spoke for both of them. "I....I wasn't expecting that." No one had warned her that hands on her arse could feel so incredible, or that kissing would feel so good!

Leaning towards her so that he could kiss her cheek, he said quietly, "Neither was I. I don't know anything about you, but it doesn't matter. Whatever that was that just happened, I don't ever want to end and I don't ever want to share it with anyone else."

The intensity of his words matched the intensity of his thoughts and she knew, though she didn't know how she knew, that the young man holding her close was 'the one'. There were a thousand reasons that they shouldn't be together, but not a single one of them alone, nor all of them together, was enough to make her do other than what she had already decided to do – which was to tell him everything about her and see where the pieces landed.

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Santo Tomas, south of Bahia Soledad, Baja, Mexico, Saturday, January 9, 1996

Rubbing his temples, Merced swept the sweat from his brow and looked out over the Pacific Ocean, as the sun set in the western sky. The backs of the incoming waves, hundreds of feet below where he sat, shimmered with flashes of gold and silver as the afternoon's slowly fading light caught each crest. The waves roared with a rhythmic, entrancing sound as each crashed and broke upon the shore and he wondered just what could be more beautiful. Certainly, there was nothing quite like the warmth and peace of the place anywhere in his native land and he wondered, as he leaned back against the red rock boulder behind him, whether he would ever see his home...well, at least such as it had once been...again.

He had left England in late July, once the great exodus had begun, and hadn't looked back since. The five-hundred galleons that had been paid to him by Albus Dumbledore to find Minerva McGonagall remained in the velvet sack, which was in turn, carefully concealed inside the secret compartment of the carry-all bag that lay beside him on the ground. He would return the money were he ever able to...but he was never going to be able to fulfill the contract. Minerva

McGonagall had completely up and disappeared. No one had any idea where she had gone. He suspected that the Gringotts Goblins knew, but it was an altogether different thing to get them to admit it. Their own vows of secrecy, which they magically and physically enforced upon all Gringotts employees, were impossible to break...and even if they weren't, being caught trying to get an employee to do so got you a one-way ticket to the hell that was working in a Goblins-run mine for the rest of your (short) life.

So...what to do? England had fallen to the dark lord and the one person whose task it would be to destroy him once and for all had fled to parts unknown. Wincing, Merced surmised that Minerva McGonagall had gone to wherever Potter was, but tracking Potter had proved impossible as well. That was the thing about hiding. If you knew what you were doing...really knew...then you could drop off the map and disappear forever. It had to do with creating multiple layers of secrets, all protected by the Fidelius charm, using different secret-keepers; whose identities, in turn, were also protected by the Fidelius charm. If done correctly, there was no way to ever discover where the secrets began and who might be in a position to know them.

Idly, Merced took out a note-pad and pen, eschewing parchment and quill as being horribly antiquated, and began making lists of those who he knew or suspected of being with Potter. He didn't know much, as the student lists that he needed had been absconded with by McGonagall herself.

He listed the teachers first, because at least some of them might not think to hide with the same level of effort or paranoia that he suspected Potter had used.

Minerva McGonagall Pomona Sprout Bathsheda Babbling

Filius Flitwick Poppy Pomfrey Aurora Sinistra

Septima Vector Rolanda Hooch

One thing struck him immediately as odd. All but one of the people on the list of professors likely to have joined Potter were female. He wondered if that said something, but decided that he couldn't worry about it – at least for the moment.

The next list was of the students who were likely to have joined Potter. There were some well-worn names...ones that had made the Daily Prophet, before it closed down.

Ginny Weasley Hermione Granger Ron Weasley

Luna Lovegood Neville Longbottom

He tried to think of any others who had ever been mentioned in the Prophet and could come up with only three other names:

Cedric Diggory Cho Chang Victor Krum

Pansy Parkinson Daphne Greengrass

There was one other name that came to mind, but he was sure that the student, Draco Malfoy, was unlikely to want to have anything to do with Potter, given the fact that Malfoy had been a well-know (or at least well-suspected) follower of the dark lord. Krum was, he thought, a Durmstrang student – or at least had been one. Being an exiled – there really wasn't any other word for it - bounty hunter was tough. Without the kind of resources that he used to have, there was precious little that he could do. Muggle resources, even if he knew how to use them, weren't going to avail him any, because every single person he was hunting was magical and would use magical means to hide.

Sitting back again, Merced tried to let his mind wander, so that he could do a kind of 'free-association' exercise that he had once been taught, when his skills were still developing. It was a worthwhile practice and had yielded him many interesting insights over the years about those whom he sought...but that had been when he had had magical all around to guide his mind and help him make the intuitive leaps that he needed. Where he sat though, even surrounded by the magic and majesty of nature, left him....nothing.

After a half-hour, Merced gave up. Usually flashes of insight came to him after ten to fifteen minutes and were enough to set him on the right track. Going a half-hour meant that he wasn't going to get anything unless he got to the right place and picked up the right clues.

meant the Chief of the Air Staff himself and his immediate subordinate, Air Marshal Sir Timothy Ivo Jenner.

The first bit of business was to get the pallets under cover, to one of the unused air hangers towards the far end of the base. That meant getting a fork-lift and a long, flat-bed truck, neither of which he knew how to drive or operate. Shaking his head, he wondered (and not for the first time) why the hell he had decided to join the air service. Surely the jar-heads didn't get these kinds of FUBAR'd orders, did they?

Looking around, Weatherby saw that the sun had set. The winds were picking up too, and he had to pull his overcoat closed. It was going to be a long, long night.

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January 12, 1996 – up in the grain silo, behind the barns of Chateau "Neige et Chevaux", south of Village of Nouainville and west Cherbourg-Octeville.

First light had come and gone for Ron Weasley, just like the morning chores. By ten am, he found himself with nothing to do until his girl had returned from walking the horses. His girl? Yes, he thought hopefully. She was his girl. Just like he was her boy.

Leaning back against a sack of dried, cracked-corn pellets, Ron smiled to himself. Their relationship was so new and so easy that it felt like they had always been together. Even her revelation of being a half-vampire hadn't bothered him. Especially since she had explained that, at least for the most part, she was a 'vegetarian' vampire (she drank cow's blood as her 'almost exclusive' source of blood – with only an occasional human thrown in). She had explained patiently that they – her family, that was – served as a kind of silent, volunteer law-enforcement team – by killing those (the ones who deserved it) who hadn't been dealt with by Muggle law-enforcement. At first, of course, he had paled with real fear (for himself, mostly) at the thought of Jeanette and her family hunting bad-guys in the dark of night, among the alleyways and side-streets of Cherbourg and then drinking their blood.

"H....h....how many?" he had asked her finally, unable to stop himself.

She had sat down beside him and taken his hand in hers before answering soberly. "Three, so far. I'm young, Ron. I'm only 6 and a half..."

The fact that she had had to reach over and gently close his mouth for him made him laugh. "What?" he had said in real surprise. "You're having me on..."

"No, I'm not. We age fast at first. I'll be full-grown by the end of next year...and then I might not ever change again. No one knows. There are so few of us who are half-and-half that little is known. I can tell you though that I will live a very, very long time."

His heart sank. Wizards never lived beyond two hundred and fifty years, unless they had the Elixir of Life – and the secret of that potion had died with Nicholas Flamel, the last known creator of the Philosopher's Stone. Harry – and Dumbledore – had made sure that the Stone that had been hidden at Hogwarts during his first year had been destroyed, so that Voldemort could not use it to regain a body (and immortality).

It hadn't taken long, a couple of days really, for Ron to realize that being with Jeanette meant more to him than anything else and that the only way to achieve that was to have her turn him. The problem, as she had then explained, was that she wasn't venomous (she didn't carry the virus in her saliva that could turn him). He'd have to be turned, when the time was right, by one of her family.

With a spark of brilliance that he thought Hermione would have found astonishing (thinking about her hurt a whole lot less now that he had Jeanette), Ron had remembered that Hermione had talked about how Muggle diseases sometimes got passed from one to another by blood. When he had asked Jeanette about it, she had lit up like a Muggle Christmas tree that Ron had once seen as a young boy when his father had taken him to Diagon Alley for a bit of last-minute Christmas shopping.

"Of course! You're right! We could use some of my blood!" she had said. "I should have remembered that. It's a big deal at the butchery my family owns. Certain cows can't be sold off for meat or milk because they're sick – and usually they're sick because they've

been eating feed that was contaminated with re-cycled cow and the cow's blood that's been made into livestock feed."

Jeanette had giggled at him, both because of the look he had given her and the thought that he had let her hear "You just lost me with that."

Patiently, she had explained to him that it had long been a practice to grind up the leftover bits of cows that had been butchered, but not sold, and turn it into feed for other cows and that the practice had been found to pass on certain kinds of diseases, and therefore been banned. She had gone on to explain that there was some contaminated feed left over in certain places and that they – her family and the other vampires who worked at the butchery – still saw cows that had become sick because of it.

"Ewwwwwwwww" he had thought to her, after she had described the whole mess.

"Hey! It's because of them that I came to be here, so don't knock it! And besides, cow-blood is what keeps me healthy." She didn't say that other options, like deer, etc. didn't taste or smell very good and were used by her and her family as meals of last resort.

Grinning, he had held up both hands, in the traditional sign of surrender...which prompted her to launch herself at him and knock him to the ground, so that she could tickle him and then kiss him senseless – which she happily did. As they fell to the hay-covered floor, their issues went away; replaced in the moment by the happiness they both felt in having found someone to love.

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Before you break away from this story, I need to say a few things. First – please do not be overly concerned about there being a huge Twilight/HP cross here. I'm only adding this last bit because it plays into one of my story-lines and I need the space and time to do it right. If it has not already become obvious, let me say that yes, in fact, I am trying to rehabilitate Ron as a character and this sub-story is my way of doing that. You'll all see how this plays out in later chapters. Let me reassure all of you that this story is and will continue to be about Harry and Hermione.

Second, where I've borrowed from Stephanie Meyers, I've added my own twists, as you've seen. I think that Meyers is a wonderfully entertaining writer – but isn't even in JKR's class (and that's saying something, because of how bad I feel books 5, 6, & 7 were). Meyers doesn't know squat about biology and it shows in her descriptions.

Third, for those of you who have written to say that this story looks or feels a lot like "Sunrise over Britain", I want to let you know that I've never read it and won't do so – at least until this story is done. I try to acknowledge where I've borrowed material and I try not to be corrupted by things unknowingly. I've heard very great things about "Sunrise over Britain" and I hope to have the time, someday, to read it.

As usual, I would ask you to please leave a review. Reader-reviews are the life-blood of this kind of writing and I need/want them no less than the next person. Plus, it gives me a sense of what's working and what isn't.

Regards,

the_scribbler

chp16